

# **UNIVERSITY MOMS: AN EVOCATIVE STORY**

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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Much of the research on women who become mothers during their teenage years has focused on risks and negative outcomes. Many of these risks are directly linked to the limited education of women who become pregnant before finishing high school. Research indicates that many young pregnant and parenting women drop out of high school and live in poverty... Some women, however, who become mothers during their high school years do go on to complete high school as well as post-secondary education, which significantly reduces the risks associated with poverty.

In this study, I have revealed the experiences of one woman who became a mother before she had completed high school. After experiencing many of the risks associated with adolescence, as well as lone-parenting, she went on to pursue a university degree. Her story lends insight into the issues, challenges, and resiliency factors she faced along her journey. Hers is a story not only of personal change and development but also of issues reaching beyond her life into the social arena.

Using Immersion/Chrystallization of the interview and fieldnotes collected for this study, I have presented this positive research as an evocative story. To represent this story, I used elements of both autoethnography and fiction. Themes and significant events within the participant's life were represented in the form of fictional accounts., which I connected and interpreted through my own experience, providing the autoethnographic component of this research.

The ultimate purpose of this research is the evocative story that I have presented. This is a story that will lead the reader to understand the complexity of the life of a lone-mother, to know the story of her life and to enter into her feelings, to find her inner story. It is a story that not only tells of personal experiences but also confronts the patriarchal structures of society that enmesh lone-mothers and challenges many of the myths or grand narratives that define the lives of teenage mothers.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The inspiration for this thesis, indeed the current direction of my life, was born with my daughter nearly 10 years ago. She is my true inspiration, in this and all things. I love you Syd. Thanks for honoring me with your presence in my life.

I also extend my sincerest gratitude to Tammy who welcomed me into her heart and her home to share her story with me. I admire your courage and selflessness in offering your experiences and your wisdom to others.

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Last but not least, to my mom and dad who have offered their support throughout this journey. My mom, who helps me to appreciate the opportunities I have and have created for myself. My dad and my hero, who has taught by example that when one is motivated by the heart and all that is kind and good, life is full.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	iii
LIST OF APPENDICES .....	v
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....	4
Adolescent Mothers: A Growing Trend .....	4
The Effects of Pregnancy on Adolescent Development .....	5
Common Factors Linked to Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting .....	7
Risks Associated with Being an Adolescent Mother .....	8
Education as a Means of Creating Positive Outcomes .....	9
Exploring Resiliency .....	11
Beyond the Individual .....	12
Conclusion .....	12
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY .....	15
Qualitative Research .....	15
Autoethnography .....	16
Arts-Based Research .....	17
The Use of Fiction in Research .....	18
Summary .....	19
Data Collection .....	19
Participant Selection .....	20
Indepth Interviews .....	20
Fieldnotes .....	21
Journalling .....	21
Data Analysis .....	22
Creative Synthesis .....	22
Quality in Arts Based Research .....	24
The Importance of Engagement in Arts-Based Research .....	24
Ethical Considerations and Participant Protection .....	26
CHAPTER 4 AN EVOCATIVE STORY .....	28
Life Meets Research .....	28
Participants Needed .....	30
Meeting Face to Face .....	33
Personal Reflections: Now and Then .....	35

Introducing Motherhood .....	35
Baby Makes Two .....	38
Struggling to Survive: Tammy's Experience of Marriage .....	41
Gifts and New Beginnings .....	42
Motherhood: Tammy's Second Time Around .....	44
Giving Birth: A New Life For Tammy .....	46
The Pull of Personal Experience: My Angry Voice .....	47
Tammy's Struggles .....	48
Clinging to Hope: Tammy's Determination to Survive in the Face of Adversity .....	51
Out of the Darkness: A Life Altering Nudge .....	51
A Day in the Life of Tammy .....	53
Social Support: The Importance of Others in Tammy's Life .....	57
Tammy's Message to Other Lone-Mothers .....	59
Epilogue: A Message From Tammy .....	64
CHAPTER 5 REFLECTIONS ON TAMMY'S NARRATIVE .....	66
Discouragers: Factors that prevented Tammy from Pursuing University Sooner .....	67
Encouragers: What Prompted Tammy to Pursue University .....	70
What Kept Tammy Motivated to Succeed at University .....	72
Significant Events: Linking Emotional Themes to Needs .....	74
Connecting Needs to Process .....	78
Implications for Practice and Policy .....	80
Supporting Young Mothers .....	81
From Self to Society and Grand Narratives: Theoretical Reflections .....	83
Resilience .....	83
A Societal View .....	84
The "Good Mother" Myth .....	85
Independence .....	87
Pulling It All Together: Discussion .....	88
Society .....	90
Focusing Comment .....	91
Personal Reflections on My Study .....	91
REFERENCES .....	93

**LIST OF APPENDICES:**

APPENDIX A: University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Research Ethics Board Approval .....	98
APPENDIX B: Indepth Interviews - Guiding Questions .....	99
APPENDIX C: Consent Form .....	100
APPENDIX D: Transcript Release Form .....	103
APPENDIX E: Krumer-Nevo's (2003) Patterns of Help and Tammy's Process .....	104

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

A lone parent heads over 1.1 million of the nearly eight million families in Canada; women head over three-quarters of them (Statistics Canada, 1996). Since my daughter's birth in January 1995, I have been among this growing number of lone-mothers and have since met and befriended numerous others. These women come from a variety of ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds; our life choices have been as varied as our personal histories. Some of my friends have chosen to support their families through employment, while others have relied heavily upon social assistance. Some decided, upon motherhood, to return to high school and then to pursue post-secondary education. I, too, have chosen this latter path and can speak from experience about many of the hardships and rewards this choice has brought me.

Most people I know are supportive and share their respect for the efforts I make as a single-mother and university student. Over the years, however, I have faced negative attitudes about my single-parent status. My sensitive nature sometimes allows these painful experiences to resurface. Yet, an angry, proud, and determined force inside me pushes my chin up when I feel like burying my head in the sand. This same part of me has directed the topic of my Master's thesis.

Although personal convictions have shaped my research topic, my review of the literature has created a desire to focus my research on a specific group of lone-mothers: those who had become parents during adolescence. In this area, much of the literature on adolescent mothers seemed to take on negative connotations, focusing on pregnancy prevention, risk factors, and negative outcomes. I was ecstatic to finally find a limited number of qualitative studies that explored resiliency in adolescent mothers who remained and were successful in high school (Carey, Ratliff, & Lyle, 1998). Yet, as much of the literature presented in the next chapter acknowledges, post-secondary education is more likely to ensure the well-being of these young mothers than secondary education alone.

Initially, when I narrowed my topic to adolescent mothers, I grappled with the choice of changing my focus to the high school rather than post-secondary level because, as subsequent sections of this proposal will acknowledge, the incidence of high school drop-out remains high among adolescent mothers. However, after reading through large amounts of literature, I found that although lone-mothers who attain a high school education fare better than those who drop out (Leadbeater, 1996), single mothers with post-secondary education have the greatest economic, social, and psychological stability (Van Stone, Nelson, & Niemann, 1994). Thus, my decision to focus this study at the university level was two-fold. It was based upon choosing a context that had optimal implications for adolescent mothers and that would build upon existing literature. Further, my curiosity was peaked. Again and again I wondered, "What it was about such women and their experience that led them towards university?"

I find much of my personal curiosity and purpose for this research reflected in the words of Linares, Leadbeater, Kato, and Jaffe (1991):

The relative importance of factors that contribute to individual variations in school outcomes are largely unknown. Who stays in school despite early parenting and why?...Such knowledge offers to lead us beyond generalizations that stereotype adolescent mothers as high risk for school dropout and life scripts of economic dependency. (p.380)

My effort to gain a deeper understanding of factors that encourage or discourage young mothers to pursue university education focused on the experiences of one woman, Tammy. Following ethical approval for this study (Appendix A), I advertised for participants by posting information about my study at a campus daycare. Tammy read the advertisement and contacted me, expressing her interest in participating.

Tammy had her first child at the age of 18, before she had completed high school. Following her son's birth, she completed high school. However, overwhelmed by the responsibilities of motherhood and stress she experienced in supporting her son as a lone-mother, she set aside her dream to attend university. It was not until Tammy was in her mid-20s; after she had her second child and was raising both her children as a lone-mother, that she decided to pursue a university education. I found my major passion behind exploring and writing about a lone and, at one-time, adolescent mother who attends university in my desire to provide Tammy with an opportunity to share and celebrate her experiences. Many of the interview questions I asked Tammy explored aspects of her experience that discouraged her from pursuing university sooner than she did and that encouraged her to do so after she gave birth to her second child at the age of 26. Interview questions also focused on uncovering the challenges and motivators she has encountered during her university experience.

Tammy was met by challenges of a personal nature that she assumed responsibility for and decided to view as opportunities for positive change. Personal reflection helped her to become more accountable for her choices, improved her self-esteem, and encouraged her to set personal goals. However, Tammy was also faced by challenges that were more difficult to overcome and over which she had little control. These challenges included structural barriers, such as lack of family-friendly working conditions, financial difficulties and role demands often faced by lone-parents, and limited opportunities for flexible quality childcare. Many of the personal and structural challenges evolved out of societal ideologies that place value on patriarchal family structures. These include grand narratives such as the "Good Mother Myth" (Doyle and Paludi, 1998) and value-laden dichotomies such as independence verses dependence. The impact that such societal ideologies had on Tammy's experience are discussed in Chapter 5.

Ultimately, what emerges in presenting the data collected through interviews with Tammy is an evocative story that creates a picture of Tammy's experiences as a lone-mother who pursued a university education. It also incorporates aspects of autoethnography as I reflect on my experiences as a researcher and a lone-mother who, like Tammy, pursued university after becoming a mother. The themes and significant events in Tammy's life, which emerged throughout our interviews, are presented using fiction, an arts-based methodologies. The purpose of using fictional writing, is to create a more dimensional picture and understanding of who Tammy is and the emotional impact of her experiences.

I hope that Tammy's experience will provide practical information to individuals working within



institutions who can, and often do, influence the lives of young women such as Tammy. As Tammy's story demonstrates, these persons may include counsellors, Social Services employees, or educators at secondary and post-secondary levels. A major purpose of presenting this evocative story is to provide these professionals with personalized insight into the individual and societal barriers that Tammy and other young women in similar situations face. Tammy's personalized accounts of her experience also provide information that can be applied at a practical level to encourage and support the education of young mothers.

I also hope this work will pass through the hands of women with similar stories, informing, empowering, and charging them with energy as well. I want Tammy's beauty, a beauty I had the privilege of knowing first hand, to be as real for them, on paper, as it was for me in the flesh and blood. My ultimate desire is that the larger reality, the unrelenting waves of societal-based ideologies, will pound at my reader's heart with as much force as they have upon the life of Tammy.

Through laughter, tears, anger, and exhilaration, this research experience has moved me inside and beyond myself.

You are cordially invited to join me on this journey.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this study I have explored the experiences of a woman who became a mother during her high school years. Tammy, the participant, had her first child before completing high school. She was 18-years-old when her son was born. Her second child, a daughter, was born following a relationship when she was 26-years-old. Tammy is currently a lone-mother enrolled in full-time university studies. Based on the philosophy of qualitative and arts-based inquiry, which guides this research, I have pondered whether or not the traditional practice of reviewing and presenting literature is appropriate. I also had concerns that in presenting previous arguments, findings, and statistics, I would reaffirm many negative stereotypes and beliefs about adolescent mothers that I had hoped this research would destroy.

Ultimately, I decided I would include this section for several reasons. First, I hope that reviewing current literature on the topic of teenage mothers will acknowledge the importance and timeliness of this study. Second, perhaps I am sounding hypocritical in saying this, I do want readers to walk away from this literature review with a particular picture of these young women in their minds; a picture of compassion and respect for the courage that Tammy, and other women in similar situations, exude in taking on the honorable responsibility of motherhood, despite the individual and societal challenges they face. Further, in emphasizing challenges faced by young mothers in our society, I hope that readers will recognize the incredible spirit of those women, like Tammy, who 'beat the odds,' so to speak. I also hope all who read will adopt a more critical analysis of the risks that confront young mothers in general, questioning a common tendency to hold mothers, rather than society, solely responsible for the struggles they so often endure.

#### **Adolescent Mothers: A Growing Trend**

Statistics estimate that within Saskatchewan, 54.2 out of every 1000 females under the age of 19 become pregnant (Statistics Canada, Health Statistics Division, 1997). This is well above the 1997 national rate, of 42.7 per 1000 females (Statistics Canada, Health Statistics Division, 1997). Despite the seemingly high rate of teenage pregnancy throughout North America, it is no higher than in previous decades (Steinberg, 1999). What has changed are the options available for pregnant adolescents (Maynard, 1997). In past decades, unwed, pregnant young women faced two primary options: marriage or adoption (Steinberg, 1999). Today, changing values and societal patterns have created alternative choices for pregnant adolescents. Not only is marriage occurring later in life, but changes in family patterns, from nuclear to single-parent and combined families, are making it more acceptable for young unwed mothers to keep and raise their children (Maynard, 1997). In fact, data suggest many teens who become pregnant have themselves been raised within alternative family systems (Bickel, Weaver, William, & Lange, 1997; Moore, Manlove, Gleib, & Morrison, 1998).

Pillow's (2004) research in the area of adolescent mothers brings forth important insights and a

critical perspective on the literature about adolescent mothers. Having spent many years studying the lives of teen mothers, Pillow has changed her emphasis from a focus on the women themselves to the discourses that construct and represent them. Her American-based research acknowledges that the percentage of women who become pregnant during adolescence has declined over the past three decades. Despite this decline, she notes a growing emphasis on this population within academic literature, within professional practice, and within general society. She also notes a growing inclination to view the phenomenon of adolescent pregnancy as a problem. This problematic focus, believes Pillow, stems from assumptions of risk that underlie and ultimately shape many of the research findings. Pillow advocates for the importance of acknowledging the social and political ideologies that drive research and implores members of society to study such research with critical minds. Pillow states the problem this way: "themes continue to emphasize the pregnant/mothering teen as the problem, always keeping her as the target of analysis and ignoring social and structural inequities that construct teen pregnancy as problematic" (p. 6).

It was easy for the purpose of this literature review for me to find and cite literature based on the risks associated with adolescent pregnancy and parenting, literature from a problem perspective. In contrast to this literature, my study has focused on the life of an individual participant and shares with the reader her experiences and the strengths that this teen mom had. I did not want to present her as a number; I make her real. I want readers to understand her risks, not coming from her own life, her lack of ability or age, but from structural barriers she had to face within society. As you read through the studies and statistics presented in the following section, I hope that you will do so with the critical mindset that Pillow (2004) so strongly advocates, to acknowledge that this research comes from a determined context. I want you to ask why the issue of teen moms is a focus and to know that their lives are embedded within political forces that have influenced past research and the assumptions that underlie this research.

### The Effects of Pregnancy on Adolescent Development

Before proceeding with the following section, I feel it is important to present a "forewarning." The information provided here, based on the reading I have done, is generic or common to many developmental texts. Although these views are widely shared within psychology, medicine, and society in general, many feminist thinkers may cringe at my inclusion of this information. Although different schools of thought occur within feminist literature on issues about female development, a common critique is that the way women have been socialized to understand female development is disempowering to them. Over time, feminists have argued that societal focus on male and female differences has reinforced the status quo, created an air of shame and disgust over natural female processes, and/or has turned what is the natural part of human development into a period fraught with turmoil and dramatic change. My own inclination is to agree with the belief that societal gender myths and ideologies disempower females. However, regardless whether one argues that issues related to adolescent females are products of biological differences or societal messages, the fact remains that females are often affected by pubertal changes.

The impact of puberty in females is evident in the fact that psychological disorders such as

depression and eating disorders often emerge in females during early adolescent years (Santrock, 1996). Gergen (2001) believes that because girls seem more fully identified with their bodies, bodily changes at puberty become an enormous issue for identity formation. Thus, I felt it was important to include a section on the different aspects of human development so readers could get a sense of the overwhelming number of issues, both internal and external, young pregnant women face.

Puberty can be defined as a rapid change to physical maturation involving hormonal and bodily changes that occur primarily during early adolescence (Santrock, 1996). In terms of physical changes in puberty, menstruation, enlarged breasts, the appearance of pubic hair, and widening hips are characteristic of female development. In conjunction with these changes, increased estrogen levels have been linked to emotional changes such as heightened anger and aggression (Santrock, 1996). A young woman's increased sexuality brings with it specific psychological changes related to what Pipher (1994) regards as the crossroads between adulthood and childhood. In essence, the journey from childhood to adulthood is often a time when young women struggle for autonomy yet remain dependent upon many of the securities offered in youth.

Pregnancy, characterized by numerous physical, emotional, and psychological changes (MacLean, 1993), may be considered a developmental phase within itself (Michaels & Goldberg, 1988). The experience of pregnancy during adolescence is unique because pregnancy takes place in conjunction with adolescent development. Researchers have termed the phenomenon of teenage pregnancy the "double whammy" (Michaels & Goldberg, 1988) because a young woman is faced at the same time with the developmental changes associated with adolescence and pregnancy.. Although the changes associated with pregnancy in adults can have profound effects (MacLean, 1993), it is arguable that they may have an even greater impact on adolescents facing issues of identity formation, pregnancy, and parenting all at the same time.

When pregnancy is added to issues of adolescent development, a young female must face the physical, emotional, and hormonal changes associated with pregnancy at a time when the family dynamics are changing, exploration of sexuality has only recently begun, and peer relations are becoming increasingly important (Santrock, 1996). Even the school setting has implications for young pregnant women who may experience physical discomfort such as nausea or psychological and emotional discomfort within the very public and peer-oriented domain of school. In essence, normal developmental changes and issues that often cause confusion and insecurity in adolescents may be exaggerated when coupled with issues related to pregnancy and parenting.

Cognitive processes are also changing throughout adolescence. Santrock (1996) believes that those in late adolescence (18 to 19 years of age) are more realistic and future oriented in terms of sexual relationships as well as in expectations related to career and marriage. Those in middle adolescence (15 to 17 years of age) have a tendency to romanticize sexuality, while young adolescents (10 to 15 years of age) tend to experience sex in a depersonalized way. Young adolescents are the least likely of all to practice "safe" sexual behavior (Santrock, 1996). Risk to both mother and child are increased when a young mother

lacks the cognitive capacity to understand the realities of sexuality and parenting and the implications of high-risk behaviors.

Adolescents' view of social reality is another aspect of adolescent development (Santrock, 1996). As teens mature, they begin to conceptualize, reason, and interact with their social worlds differently than they did in childhood. Adolescence is a critical period in which individuals develop personal perspectives of moral values, gender roles, role-taking abilities, peer relations, attachment, and identity (Santrock, 1996). Their new ways of thinking, combined with physical changes, interact to shape new experiences as well as new interpretations of these experiences.

The way individuals perceive their experiences and the reactions of others functions to create either a positive or negative view of self that ultimately motivates all behavior (McCombs & Whisler, 1989). In high-risk environments, where lack of positive functioning and opportunities surround many youth, the perceptions that function to create their sense of identity can disable them from conceptualizing their lives outside such narrowed boundaries. These perceptions can affect young females in several negative ways. For instance, lack of self-worth may be seen as a causal factor for early sexual experience (Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, Egolf, & Russo, 1998) because a young girl uses sexuality to feel adequate or to express the lack of value she places upon herself. Some researchers have also suggested that early motherhood may be viewed as a means of attaining the status of womanhood within environments where girls face constrained life options (Manlove, 1998). Essentially, the danger of raising a child within a continuous cycle of low self-worth and narrow perceptions reinforces the importance of providing high-risk mothers with the emotional and tangible support to encourage them to aspire beyond a life of poverty.

In summary, teen pregnancy occurs before an adolescent has fully developed a sense of identity on a physical, emotional, cognitive, and social level. Such an occurrence can wreak havoc on the lives of, not only an immature young mother, but also her child, because risks for neglect, abuse, and poverty increase (Maynard, 1997).

#### Common Factors Linked to Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting

Understanding causal factors related to teen pregnancy and the decision to parent is complex. It is important to acknowledge two factors prior to summarizing commonalities within the literature with respect to the lives of high-risk teen mothers. First, much of the information gathered is based upon research done in the United States. Thus, although many of the variables associated with this subject can be applied to commonalities found within the Canadian context, it is important to remain critical and cautious, acknowledging that demographic and cultural differences do exist. Second, what is reported here are the most common findings; exceptions to the "rules" do exist. For example, not all sexually active and pregnant teens fit into the high-risk criterion commonly reported (Carey et al., 1998). Further, not all adolescents who become pregnant raise their children. Miscarriage, abortion, and adoption may also result from adolescent pregnancy (Maynard, 1997).

Family characteristics associated with teen pregnancy and parenting include females raised in low-

income and single-parent households (Maynard, 1997). In the case of adolescent pregnancy, the likelihood of keeping one's child is increased if a mother with a low education level has raised the teen (Moore et. al., 1998). In essence, findings suggest teen parenting is associated with lack of economic opportunity characterized by low socio-economic status (SES) as well as environments which fail to encourage educational aspirations (Manlove, 1998). Although exceptions exist, those parenting adolescents under such conditions are less likely to encourage or model goals associated with educational and economic prosperity.

Although sexual activity is not limited to such a subgroup, adolescents raised in such environments are more likely than girls raised in two-parent and higher income homes to begin having sexual relationships at an earlier age. They are also less likely to use contraception and more likely to become teen mothers than females raised under higher SES conditions and within two-parent households (Moore, et al.,1998). Being raised in an abusive and neglectful environment also increases the odds that a woman will become pregnant and parent during her adolescent years. Another common familial pattern linked to teen pregnancy is that higher proportions of adolescents with siblings who are teen parents are themselves more likely to become teen parents (Rome, Rybicki, & Durant, 1998).

Individual characteristics have also been found predictive of teen pregnancy. School disengagement and dropping out has been shown to increase the likelihood of pregnancy during adolescence (Manlove, 1998). Low self-esteem and self-respect are positive indicators of increased risk (Herrenkohl, et. al.,1998). So too are problem behaviors defined within Problem Behavior Theory (Rome, et al., 1998) associating high-risk behaviors with increased chance of adolescent pregnancy and parenting: drug and alcohol use, weapon carrying, early sexual activity, multiple sexual partners, and a history of sexually transmitted disease.

#### Risks Associated with Being an Adolescent Mother

Women are more likely than men to have family responsibilities at an early age, and those responsibilities tend to be substantial. This directly affects many of these women's educational attainments and their participation in the job market. (Human Resources Development Canada, 1998)

Poverty, associated with low educational attainment, is a common risk faced by a large percentage of adolescent mothers (Meschke & Bartholomae, 1998). Although two-thirds of high school drop-outs in Canada are males, only 28 per cent have dependents. However, 64 per cent of females who leave school have dependent children (Human Resources Development Canada, 1998). This and other research suggests that among females, adolescent parenting and high-school drop-out are associated with one another (Camarena, Minor, Melmer & Ferrie, 1998; Furstenburg, Brooks-Gunn & Chase-Lansdale, 1989; Human Resources Development Canada, 1998; Manlove, 1998; Linares, et al., 1991; Solomon & Liefeld, 1998; Stevenson, Maton & Teti, 1998). Adolescent mothers who drop out of high school often attribute common

factors to their low academic attainment. These include low occupational aspirations and repeat teen pregnancy (Manlove, 1998); difficulties juggling the responsibilities of school and mothering (Camarena et al., 1998); lack of feasible support such as transportation or daycare (Camarena et al., 1998); depression and problems maintaining grade and academic status due to pregnancy during high school (Linares et al., 1991).

Studies show that, on average, women who become mothers during adolescence earn half the income of females who postpone motherhood until after the age of 20. Unwed adolescent mothers are also less likely than older unwed mothers to receive consistent, if any, child support payments (Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis [OSED], 1995). The picture is not much better for adolescent mothers who do marry. Their husbands are three times less likely to complete high school than their unmarried counterparts. Unemployment rates are also higher among young married fathers than among their unmarried peers (OSED, 1995).

Common financial issues are often coupled with other issues related to the fathers of children born to adolescent mothers. These men often display higher rates of problem behaviors than other males (Steinberg, 1999). These behaviors often involve physical and emotional abuse, problems with the law, and substance abuse, behaviors that can have a direct and negative affect on adolescent mothers and their children (Steinberg, 1999). In such cases, adolescent mothers and their children are at high-risk for psychological and social problems.

Other risk factors linked to adolescent pregnancy and parenting include inadequate prenatal care and higher than average numbers of low-birth weight infants (Santrock, 1996). Preschool and elementary school-aged children of poverty and teenage parents are at-risk for and often display behavior problems (Herrenkohl, et. al., 1998) and function lower than the norm on measures of cognitive abilities (Furstenberg, et. al., 1989). Beyond the early school years, these children often display higher aggressive tendencies, lower self-control, and more social, classroom, and learning difficulties than do children born to older mothers (Furstenberg, et al., 1989).

#### Education as a Means of Creating Positive Outcomes

Although much of the research on adolescent mothers paints a bleak picture, research has found that the education level of young mothers and overall well-being are positively correlated (Van Stone et al., 1994; Leadbeater, 1996). The research of Cary et al., (1998) focused upon young mothers successfully managing motherhood and high school concurrently. In this study, adolescent mothers in the interviews exhibited several factors that promoted high school completion and overall well-being. These included insight, initiative, quality relationships, responsibility, and a sense of rebellion against negative societal views. However, I did not come across any study that has explored teen mothers' experiences at the university level. I was left wondering if the factors important to high school success were similar or changed as a result of the university experience.

Another important factor in educational attainment is aspiration. Adolescent mothers with

educational aspirations are more likely than those without academic goals to complete high school and pursue post-secondary education (Camerena et al., 1998). Yet, research has shown that as demands and responsibilities involved in parenting occur, educational aspirations in adolescent mothers are adversely affected (Camerena, et al., 1998). It seems an individual's belief in her ability to obtain educational goals decreases once the realities associated with parenting are acknowledged. I became curious about the experiences that encourage a teen, single-mother to maintain and pursue educational aspirations.

The literature found during the course of this review about post-secondary education was not specific to adolescent mothers but generalized lone-mothers as a single group. Regardless of differences that may arise among adolescent mothers, who tend to face risks as discussed in the previous session, and older lone-mothers, many of the findings within the post-secondary literature overlapped and expanded on Carey et al.'s (1998) findings.

Research suggests that lone-mothers who attain post-secondary education reap more than economic benefits. Van Stone et al. (1994) found that as a result of their college experience, single mothers in the United States benefited from increased psychological, emotional, and relational functioning. Areas of growth included a better understanding of people; improved communication skills; increased problem-solving abilities; greater tolerance and open-mindedness towards others; more interest, enthusiasm, and sympathy towards others; and less defensiveness. Their children also reaped benefits as a result of their mothers' educational experiences. These benefits included increased respectfulness and willingness to ask others for help and increased resourcefulness and expansion of their interests and future goals (Van Stone et al., 1994).

Cheng's (cited in Van Stone et al., 1994, p. 572) findings expand upon factors important to academic success. She found a common motivational profile among lone-mother college students. Cheng found single-mothers who pursued a college education scored high on measures of achievement. Sociological support from family, peers, and faculty; psychological belief factors such as self-confidence; and taking personal responsibility for performance and goal attainment were also found to be significant attributes among single-mother students (Van Stone et al., 1994). Further, participants often attributed the benefit of personal experience as important to success at the post-secondary level (Van Stone et al., 1994.). Social maturity defined by definite career aspirations, seriousness of studies, and the ability to cope successfully with the pressures of school was also significant among single-mothers successful in college (Van Stone et al., 1994).

Many characteristics and factors common to lone-mothers who pursue post-secondary education relate to the individual and her immediate support base. Bergum's (1997) work suggests that many adolescent mothers struggle because their status as adolescent mothers makes it difficult to create the internal and external factors necessary to build a stable life. She believes that for large-scale change to occur, members of society must focus on the bigger picture. Bergum (1997) argues society can encourage positive change by empathizing with adolescent mothers as individuals rather than stigmatizing them as a social problem. To highlight the negative impact stereotypes have on young women, Bergum's (1997) work



with pregnant and mothering teens found their greatest pain came not from the experience of birth and added responsibility, but the censorship their status brought them. Bergum (1997) believes society incorrectly assumes young mothers are irresponsible. She found, in working with young mothers, that their experience of motherhood has been optimal in creating a sense of meaning and identity within their lives. Her vision is backed by Carey et al. (1998) whose work also links negative societal reactions to adolescent pregnancy and parenting to many of the negative repercussions faced by these young women.

In summary, encouraging young mothers to pursue higher education is a key factor in fighting poverty because research shows that educational aspirations and achievement serve as a protective mechanism within the lives of teen mothers. Despite the positive implications education has in reducing the risks faced by adolescent mothers, further exploration within this area is needed because researchers acknowledge that they lack deep understanding of the relationship between risk and educational attainment: "[W]hile research has identified specific protective factors, a unifying theoretical framework for understanding the circumstantial and personal forces of resiliency in at-risk students is lacking" (Johnson, 1997, p. 37). In this study, I hope to encourage the empathy Bergum (1997) argues is so essential for change by telling one woman's story.

### Exploring Resiliency

Examples of lone and adolescent mothers who, despite the numerous hardships they face, experience academic success and overall well-being exemplify the essence of resiliency research. These studies focus on understanding why certain individuals, whose lives are characterized by risk factors, do not manifest high-risk outcomes (Johnson, 1997). Although different researchers in the area of resiliency offer individual definitions of this concept, many have five major components in common: (a) competence and coping in the face of significant adversity and risk; (b) development and growth over time; (c) a match between characteristics of the individual or groups of individuals (e.g. family, community) and the external environment; (d) the role of protective factors within the individual or group; and (e) the impact of social, economic, political, and cultural factors on the resiliency of individuals or groups (Mangham, McGrath, Reid, & Stewart, 1995; Shene, 1999). As resiliency literature grows, an emerging trend suggests that, contrary to past studies focusing predominantly on risk factors, many youth raised in high-risk environments go on to become healthy, functioning individuals (Henderson, 1997; Johnson, 1997; Werner, 1992). Ultimately, protective factors often have a greater impact on the lives of at-risk individuals than do negative factors.

Factors found within resiliency literature that define individuals as "at-risk" are numerous and involve both biological and environmental factors (Rak & Patterson, 1996). Biological risks include congenital defects, disabilities, and low birth weight. Commonly cited environmental factors are early deprivation, family dysfunction, poverty, abuse, numerous siblings, parental mental illness, or minimal parental education. Of course, much overlap commonly exists. For example, biological risk factors may be the result of poor maternal nutrition or substance abuse during or after pregnancy (Rak & Patterson, 1996).

Werner (1992), a forerunner in resiliency studies, believes her findings prove humans have an innate tendency towards resiliency. In her early work in this area, she studied a group of high-risk children on the island of Kauai, Hawaii (Werner, 1992). Of the 200 high-risk children followed from birth to age 32, all experienced four or more of the following risk factors: poverty, perinatal stress, family discord, divorce, parental alcoholism, and parental mental illness. Despite the fact a large proportion of this population did exhibit behavioral and coping problems in childhood and adolescence, the majority went on to lead healthy and productive lives by the time they were in their early thirties (Werner, 1992).

The work of Werner (1992) led to the assumption that resiliency functions as a process. As risk factors increase, so too does tolerance to their potential negative effects. Yet, questions related to this process and educational outcomes have yet to be answered: "[W]hile such research has identified specific protective factors, a unifying theoretical framework for understanding the circumstantial and personal forces of resiliency in at-risk students is lacking" (Johnson, 1997, p. 37). I hope that Tammy's story will lend greater insight into the nature of resiliency.

According to one hypothesis, what distinguishes resilient individuals from those who tend to succumb to the negative effects of high-risk environments is the tendency to perceive the environment in different ways (Bernard, 1993). Those not so internally and negatively influenced by the actions of others essentially feel a greater sense of control over their lives as their perception of self extends beyond the immediate. In conjunction with this, optimism is created that has a positive influence over their relationships with others who are naturally drawn to their positive nature amid negative circumstances. In essence, each attribute, perception, and sociability, promotes the other. Fortunately, characteristics of protectiveness can be fostered given supportive influences (Shene, 1999).

Henderson (1997) offers a summary of the most common protective factors found throughout the resiliency literature. These include internal protective factors such as willingness to help others, good decision-making and problem-solving skills, assertiveness, impulse control, sociability, sense of humor, internal locus of control, perceptiveness, autonomy, optimism for the future, flexibility, capacity for and connection to learning, self-motivation, personal competence, feelings of self-worth and confidence, or spirituality.

The external protective factors Henderson (1997) notes, which are characteristic of an individual's family, school, community, and peer groups include close bonds, encouragement towards positive values and aspirations, high warmth/low criticism interactions, clear boundaries, encouragement of supportive relationships with others, encouraging responsibility, access to resources, high and realistic expectations for success, encouragement of goal-setting and mastery, teaching life-skills, and an appreciation of an individual's unique personality and talents. Again, what becomes apparent in studying this list is many of these factors can be fostered through external support.

I hope then that this study will honour the internal and external protective factors that empowered and encouraged resilience in Tammy, the participant in my study.

### Beyond the Individual

As psychologists' quest to understand resiliency takes root, other schools of thought take a more critical stance, arguing for the importance of understanding human outcomes by taking a wider approach. These ideas partner prevalent and current emphasis on social justice, equality, and human rights. Included among these philosophies is a new wave of social work and feminist theory.

The Just Practice Framework is one such model (Finn & Jacobson, 2003). Although a current strength-based emphasis is pervasive across psychological and social work practice, advocates for this stance argue that change comes from acknowledging the interplay of microcosmic and macrocosmic forces (Sewell cited in Finn & Jacobson, 2003). Theorists argue that terms such as *resiliency* and *empowerment* place individual responsibility on societal-based issues such as poverty (Finn & Jacobson, 2003). Just Practice theorists understand human agency as mutually influenced by social and cultural influences. In the case of a young single mother, a Just Practice theorist would argue that risk is created, not solely by age and personal history, but by the divisions and inequalities created within our capitalist structure. Essentially, they acknowledge the experience of individual suffering while concurrently assuming that human experience is always situated within socially constructed systems of meaning and power.

Many feminist theories, while acquainting themselves with similar beliefs related to the influence of power, contend that this mutual influence between human and structure, as conveyed in Just Practice, is not mutual at all (Macleod, 2002). Theorists such as Macleod (2002) contend that society's emphasis on the pathology and risk of adolescent parenting serves to reinforce the status quo. Essentially her message is that the current structure seeks to maintain patriarchy by emphasizing the risk of childbearing outside the traditional nuclear family structure. Media portrayal of troubled young mothers serves to reinforce perfect mother fallacies, promoting mother blame and patriarchal structures. Apparent attempts to assist young mothers reinforce the 'need to intervene' due to a problem. Essentially, according to critical perspectives, this help in the form of welfare subsidies and meager college funding programs keeps young women locked within poverty or low-spectrum employment opportunities (Macleod, 2002).

### Conclusion

Countless views on the implications of adolescent parenting exist. Most of these views are pessimistic, focusing on the risks and negative outcomes associated with adolescent parenting. As mentioned early in this literature review with reference to the work of Pillow (2004), existing literature must be viewed through a critical lens and with the understanding that it evolved from and exists within a particular historical and political context. Indeed, it was not until the mid-1970s that the phrase "teen mothers" was birthed and emphasis on this phenomenon as problematic was pronounced. Although the percentage of teen pregnancy was significantly higher in the decades preceding the 1970s, the problem was hidden because adoption and early marriage were common responses to adolescent pregnancy. Pillow suggests that, since the 1970s, there has been a growing tendency to define teen mothers as problematic because increasing numbers of pregnant adolescents have chosen to raise their children outside marriage.

She believes this definition of teen pregnancy as a problem serves political and social needs to regulate sexuality and family structure. That is, focusing on teenage pregnancy and parenting as a problem serves to secure existing patriarchal structures.

My research went beyond the numbers and statistics so commonly cited. Through my stories I have provided insight into the experience first-hand and looked with optimistic, but critical eyes at the “whys” and “whats” of two young mothers who have pursued a university education. In Chapter 4 of this thesis I will introduce you to Tammy, who became a mother during her adolescent years, and myself, who became a lone-mother and university student during my early twenties. It is my hope that this approach will encourage you to celebrate the growing diversity among families within our society, to move beyond statistics to acknowledge the individuality of our situations, and to recognize the societal structures that, at times, have impeded our efforts to create a sense of safety and success for ourselves and our children.

Just as research about adolescent mothers reflects societal and political ideologies, so to do all other existing theories mentioned here, including Resiliency Theory, feminist theories, and the Just Practice Framework. Given this, it seems an impossible task to conduct any sort of thought, much less research, outside the contextual lens through which we function at every level. Although I have, for my own personal reasons, determined to frame this work through the lens of these aforementioned theories, it is important to recognize that each of these theories comes from a defined perspective. As the next chapter on methodology will attest, I have clearly identified and named my subjectivity within this work. Indeed, the methodologies utilized invite you, as well, to encounter this research while acknowledging your own subjectivity, as well as my own, and by creating your own interpretation of this research with your own personal dynamics and understanding of the world.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **METHODOLOGY**

Over a year-and-a-half ago, I met with Tammy in her home on two separate occasions. Given our physical distance and personal commitments, we also communicated with the telephone and email. The more Tammy shared of her life, the more my own life was touched and moved. I became deeply immersed with the information that Tammy shared. As the depth of her experiences resonated with me, I felt ethically and personally compelled to present the data in a way that would invite readers to engage themselves within our individual lives and the experiences we shared together.

When all was said and done, I created an evocative story that combines my experiences with those of a single participant: Tammy. My research methodology has combined aspects of qualitative inquiry, specifically autoethnography, with arts-based research.

#### **Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive practices that make the world visible. Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3).

My research question, about personal experiences and their meaning in the lives of teen-age mothers who pursue university education, aligned itself naturally with the intent of qualitative inquiry.

Over the past several decades, as social scientists have searched for ways to gain deeper understanding of human experience, qualitative inquiry has emerged and evolved. As Cresswell (1998) explains, qualitative research is based on the assumptions that subjectivity is inherent in research, that meaning and depth arise from direct and personal contact with the person or phenomenon being studied, that bias is a natural and unavoidable part of any research, and that qualitative research is predominantly inductive by nature.

The nature of qualitative research is to contextualize and construct personal realities and to discover how individuals make meaning out of their lives (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996). Studying the lives of individuals from a qualitative perspective, researchers can explore and gain an in-depth and holistic understanding of lived-experience (Bickman & Rog, 1998). Still, any exploration and interpretation is touched by those who are touched by the research, be it participant, researcher, or reader.

Personal experience and meaning were central elements in answering many of the questions that I sought to answer. Thus, for me, it seemed only natural that I would utilize qualitative methodologies to collect data, offering me a venue to explore and describe Tammy's experiences within a setting that felt natural to her. Tammy chose to meet with me in her home.

It soon became apparent, however, that much of my own personal understanding of Tammy's experience was based upon the emotions, empathy, and personal reactions that her experiences stirred in

me. Although qualitative methodology offered me a venue for exploring Tammy's experiences and their meanings, I adapted techniques from autoethnography to acknowledge and incorporate my own voice into this work. Our stories together provided a deep, evocative understanding of the world of teenage mothers.

### Autoethnography

My desire to explore lives and express my understanding through writing led me, initially, to propose this research would be presented as a narrative. What emerged, however, as I worked my way in and out of the data, was the integration of pieces of my own story. As I immersed myself within the study of Tammy's life experiences, I also studied myself. Despite my initial efforts to escape such a vulnerable position, I could not portray the essence of the learning and understanding I gained from this research without openly acknowledging myself within it. Further, I truly came to understand that by not acknowledging how deeply this process affected me, I would contaminate this work and do an injustice to both Tammy and my readers. And so, I determined to enter into the research by writing from an autoethnographic space.

It has been a very difficult and humbling experience for me to openly acknowledge how interested I am in myself! Fortunately, researchers such as Ellis (1999) celebrate the introspective qualities of autoethnographic research. Autoethnography, by its very nature, is a self-reflective and introspective venture that Ellis (1999) believes to be essential in examining human experience and its meaning. She contends that connecting to others in a way that encourages questions about self is a natural and important aspect of learning. This process of connecting with others takes place on different levels, throughout the process of the research and after, by creating a work that draws readers in.

As a method of research, autoethnography encourages the researcher to enter into and become part of the research experience as well as processing and openly defining the immersion that takes place (Ellis, 1999). Essentially, by openly acknowledging the personal perspective from which I worked and wrote, I recognized the personal filters through which my writing evolved. Indeed, each reader, too, will view what is written through the lens of personal experience and cognition.

Not only do experiential filters shape this work, so do issues of individual style. Had Tammy been asked to write her own story it would have appeared quite different from mine. However, by immersing myself within her story and by working closely with Tammy to ensure my writing grasped the essence of her experience, we collaboratively worked to present a piece that conveys the meanings we both intended.

It was a messy and often times blurry journey. As I immersed myself in the data and came back out, intent on creating a portrayal of my understanding, I often felt overwhelmed by the many levels of insight I had gleaned. I struggled with what to do and how to present personal issues because I often found myself recognizing institutional and societal issues.

Ellis (1999) touches on the complexity of this process, describing autoethnography as a genre of writing that uses the researcher as a tool. Discovery evolves as the researcher moves back and forth

between the self and the participant, and the social and cultural structures surrounding them. When researchers immerse themselves in the individual, they gain a deeper sense of that which is systemic (Ellis, 1999). "Our lives are particular, but they also are typical and generalizable since we all participate in a limited number of cultures and institutions" (p. 674). Thus, to honour Tammy's individuality, I presented her particular story in Chapter 4. I also honoured my own voice by presenting autoethnographic accounts of my own experiences as a researcher and lone-mother. However, as I immersed myself in interview data, I found myself drawing links between Tammy's story and literature that I had had read. I acknowledge these links by composing my analysis in Chapter 5.

As my final work attests, this experience was a deeply connective and evocative one for me. Portraying this experience on paper, however, was a difficult task. Because autoethnography emphasizes subjectivity, Ellis (1999) contends that the written outcomes are as individual as its authors, taking a variety of different forms. Important, regardless of written form, however, is the ability of one's work to convey meaning attached to an experience. "You want to tell a story that readers can enter and feel a part of" (Ellis, 1999, p. 674).

The emotions and reactions that I had throughout the research process found their voice through the use of autoethnographic methodology. By virtue of this methodology, a variation on qualitative inquiry, I acknowledge the subjectivity and emotion within research. The depth of this research experience, however, went beyond the scope of this methodology into the realms of personal and creative expression. To simply define this work as autoethnographic or qualitative would fail to acknowledge deeper aspects of discovery inherent in the process of creation itself. There is a growing emphasis within the humanities that seeks to do just this. Arts-based research invites and celebrates the art of creativity within research.

#### Arts-Based Research

It is about dwelling in a space of inquiry that resists formal naming: a willingness to allow for discomfort, frayed edges, and holes. (Springgay, Irwin, & Wilson, 2004, p.5)

As I immersed myself deeply within the research data, the experiences that Tammy shared, and indeed Tammy herself, touched me on many levels. Representing the depth of this experience within the scope and boundaries of a research thesis was an extremely difficult task for me. I continually felt that my writing lacked the depth entrenched in this process of emotional, academic, and personal discovery. Finally, I determined to set aside ontological beliefs and boundaries and simply write from my own personal space. What evolved was an evocative story that has used various other techniques, including fictional writing. In Chapter 4, I have used italics to present the components where I fictionalized the account of Tammy and my stories. The intention of these techniques was to represent themes, to engage readers, and to evoke emotion and compassion among readers as well. The final creation crossed beyond the boundaries of qualitative research into the realm of arts-based research

Just as social scientists have developed qualitative methodology to consider subjectivity and description in the realm of research, humanist researchers are searching for new and innovative ways to

partner the production of art into scholarly, often education-based, inquiry (Springgay et al., 2004). Springgay et al., (2004) acknowledge that, within the post-modern era, knowing merges with and moves beyond that which is factual, measurable, and describable, into the realm of personal expression and engagement.

Personal expression is as individual as its creator, taking countless forms such as those Mullen (2003) relates: "[C]reative forms of research representation -- narrative, life history, poetry, drama, visual art, and more -- have come to the fore, eliciting response, luring participation, and demanding attention" (p. 26). In the case of my research, fictional writing was the art of choice.

### The Use of Fiction in Research

Sconiers and Rosiek (2000) co-authored an article published in the *Harvard Educational Review*. In this article, they discuss the relationship between academic subjects and sociocultural influences. Their work consists primarily of a case study that reflects on the classroom dynamics and reflections of one teacher. This teacher, however, is a fictional character. The actual experiences, while co-written by Sconiers, a middle-school science teacher, are fictionalized accounts as well. The authors note several justifications for their choice of methodology. Fiction enables researchers to exemplify emotional content allowing for internal and external details. As the authors explain, fictionalized research "communicate[s] the full range of meaning in human experience" (p. 399). Sconiers and Rosiek use their work as an example of the theoretical and practical knowledge that can be gleaned from fictional stories, a depth of research not available through more conventional qualitative inquiry. The authors write:

[T]he value of the Fresno case studies lies not in their absolute truth, but in their ability to build bridges between previously separate realms of meaning in the classroom -- in this case, between a concern for teaching science subject matter and a concern about the sociocultural dimension of students' experience. (p.400)

Ceglowski (1997) embraces the use of fictional writing within her research in the area of educational policy analysis. She defines her use of short stories as "evocative representations because they evoke responses from the reading audience" (p. 198). Fictional writing, explains Ceglowski, allows researchers to capture emotional and physical elements of the research experience, thus enabling readers to "live their way into the experience" (p. 198).

For similar reasons I have used fiction as a technique within the evocative story presented in Chapter 4 of this thesis. Several significant experiences and themes ran throughout Tammy's narrative. The use of fiction, set off in the larger autoethnography through the use of italics, served to exemplify these experiences and themes. Fictionalized accounts, from a first-person, present tense perspective also allow readers to get 'inside' Tammy's head and take part in the emotional experience of her life as well. Fiction also enabled me to add color and detail to scenes to engage readers' senses, making these fictionalized accounts as deep and meaningful as possible for readers. To ensure that my fictional writing was representative of Tammy's emotional experience, I emailed Tammy several copies of Chapter 4 while I



was writing it and after I had completed the final draft. Tammy stated that she felt the use of fictional representations encouraged a deeper understanding of her experience. Essentially, as Barone (2001) articulates, deep reader engagement gleaned through the use of fiction is a powerful tool to facilitate reflection about and, ultimately change within areas being represented through this form of arts-based research.

Saunders (2003), too, argues that inviting creativity into the realm of research offers an avenue to open up our minds and explore possibilities. She uses poetry within research to engage the minds and senses of her readers, inviting them to add depth, meaning, and perspective to their quest for understanding. Saunders is among this new generation of researchers attempting to expand the domain of research to include the realm of the arts.

Eisner (1997) believes this exploration of the arts is a logical next step in our quest to "explore new assumptions about cognition, the meaning of research, and how new research methods might broaden and complement traditional ways of thinking about doing educational research" (p. 259). Eisner (1997) cites another reason for the value of arts-based research: "not every research form is good for every player. The availability of qualitative research methods in the fullness of their possibilities offers researchers opportunities to select a way of working that fits their interests" (p. 264). Mullen (2003), too, pushes for the advent of personal expression in research, describing arts-based research as a catalyst "for developing your own ever-changing montage... your theater of discovery" (p. 166).

The evocative story, as you will read in Chapter 4, is just that: an exciting opportunity to combine research with my personal passion for writing. Through the use of fictional writing techniques I have represented my own learning and questions in a way that, not only reflects my own immersion in this process, but invites readers to engage and immerse themselves as well. It is my hope and purpose that in doing so, readers will reflect on the stories here and ultimately work to change the elements within the stories that they perceive as barriers to learning and personal development for young, single mothers.

## Summary

The evocative story presented in Chapter 4 combines elements from several traditions in terms of research methodology. I used qualitative research philosophies as a foundation for researching Tammy's life in a way that would allow for insight into meaning and personal experiences. As I became deeply immersed in Tammy's experiences, however, my own reactions and feelings became very apparent. I chose autoethnography as a form of writing to acknowledge and account for the personal lens through which I interpreted Tammy's story. Finally, as a way of engaging my readers with a depth that would encourage personal reflection and learning, I incorporated arts-based research methodology, in the form of fiction (in italicized font) into this work.

## Data Collection

The data collected for this study is based on information provided by one participant who was

selected to take part in this study based on specific criteria. I used several sources of data to develop understanding for this study: information attained through two indepth interviews, fieldnotes, and journaling.

### Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling refers to obtaining participants whose life experiences align themselves with the research purpose (Merriam, 1998). I found the participant in this study through a written advertisement for participants that was distributed throughout a university campus. I set out the following criteria for prospective participants in this study:

1. Because the focus of this research relates to adolescent mothers, the participant had to assume her biological parenting role during adolescence (age 18 or younger).
2. Because one area of exploration focused on how the participant coped with the dual role of student-mother, she had to have primary or sole custodial responsibility for her child(ren).
3. For the purpose of understanding the university experience of adolescent mothers, the participant had to be enrolled full-time in university classes.
4. Given the time commitment and personal nature of this study, the participant had to be enthusiastic, cooperative, and interested in taking part in this study.

### Indepth Interviews

Qualitative interviewing is a way of finding out what others feel and think about their worlds. Through qualitative interviews, researchers can understand experiences and reconstruct events in which they did not participate (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 1).

My interviews with Tammy were based on the rationale underlying indepth interviews (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) while taking on the tone of informal conversational interviews (Johnson & Christensen, 2000).

The relationship forged between Tammy and me developed over a year and a half, beginning in November 2002. Initially, Tammy and I were introduced to each other by communicating over the telephone and by email. This form of communication helped us to maintain contact between our face-to-face meetings. One of these meetings took place over the course of an afternoon in December 2002 and the second an afternoon in May 2004.

When Tammy and I met, face-to-face, for the first time, we had already developed a familiarity with one another that set the tone for relaxed and easy communication. Based on the nature of informal conversational interviews (Johnson & Christensen, 2000), our natural, unfolding dialogue helped to create the collaborative and relaxed atmosphere that characterizes this interview style. Johnson and Christensen (2000) state that through active communication and reflection by both the participant and the researcher meaning is created. Essentially, we were able to relate to one another as women and lone-mothers as well as co-participants in this research, an essential aspect in gaining the depth of information required to

immerse myself in the data.

Indepth interviews, exploratory and collaborative in nature, also aligned themselves naturally with the rationale underlying this research. The main premise of the indepth interview is to co-create individual perceptions and understanding relating to fairly specific research questions (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Prior to each interview, I emailed Tammy specific questions I would be asking her and brought these questions with me to guide the interview. To ensure the stories resulting from our interviews were reflective of this collaborative venture, I forwarded my writing to Tammy throughout the research process. In doing so, I encouraged her to provide me with any thoughts, feedback, and potential changes she deemed necessary to make this work reflective of the experience we shared together as well as her individual experience.

Ultimately, Tammy and I embarked upon very natural and collaborative conversations, guided by indepth interview questions. My task as researcher and learner was to listen intently and reflexively, to offer probing and follow-up questions, and to create an environment of empathy and shared learning.

#### Fieldnotes

As we peer into the eyes of the other, we embark on a journey of the self: exploring our fears, celebrating our voices, challenging our assumptions, reconstructing our pasts. (Sears cited in Shacklock & Smyth, 1998, p. 74)

Fieldnotes are a written portrayal of what a researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks while collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Fieldnotes can take two forms: descriptive and reflective. I used the former, in this case, to ensure that Tammy's narrative included a vivid, visual picture of her and her surrounding environment. My fieldnotes incorporated the descriptive aspects noted in Bogdan and Biklen (1998). These are physical and behavioral aspects of participants, descriptions of the physical setting, events, and activities that took place during our interview session. Each time I sat with Tammy, I scribbled personal observations onto the pad of paper that accompanied me. Many of these notes were incorporated, through the use of thick description, into the story presented in Chapter 4.

Merriam (1998) states that fieldnotes provide researchers with the opportunity to reflect on and understand how their personal thoughts and feelings influence data collection and analysis. Not only did I note descriptive details during meetings with Tammy, I utilized reflective fieldnotes to note my own thoughts, feelings, and questions that arose during our interviews. I have written many of these personal reflections into the story presented in Chapter 4. The use of reflective fieldnotes provided me with greater insight into how my personal interpretations were reflected in this research.

#### Journaling

Crabtree and Miller (1999) stress the importance of distinguishing fieldnotes from diaries or journals. Although fieldnotes are produced immediately following a field experience, a personal journal provides the opportunity for continuous personal reflection throughout the research process. Crabtree and

Miller (1999) describe the function of journals as "notes on notes [that] track the intellectual and emotional journey of the researcher" (p. 65). Journaling played an important role throughout the process of this research. My own experiences as a single-mother guided my choice of a research topic. Admittedly, I met Tammy for the first time with pre-existing feelings of admiration, respect, and empathy. Elements of Tammy's story resonated strongly with many of my own experiences. Indeed, the use of autoethnography is the result of insights and responses gleaned through the process of journalling. Journalling was an essential tool for my own self-discovery and reflection. This method of private and quiet reflection also served to provide me with a means of distancing myself from the data, enabling me to consciously separate my own experiences from the stories that Tammy presented.

### Data Analysis

The philosophies underlying arts-based methodologies emphasize individual representation and interpretation of that which is created. Thus, it may seem appropriate to let this work stand on its own and remain open to personal analysis and interpretation of meaning. Eisner (1997) comments on this theoretical dilemma by drawing distinctions between creative expression within the realm of the arts and creative expression within the realm of educational research:

The argument is that works of art stand alone; after all, the author of a play does not provide a theoretical explication of the meaning of the play to the audience who beholds it.... I have problems with the analogy. Our work must go well beyond what a good journalist -- or even good writer -- is able to do. After all, we are expected to bring to the educational situation a theoretical and analytical background in the field of education. That background must count for something in the way in which phenomena are characterized, analyzed, and assessed. It is the use of that background and the tools secured in acquiring it that provides the distinctively educational added value to our work. (p.267)

Indeed, should readers understand and question Tammy's experience in ways other than my own analysis, which is offered within this thesis, then I have fulfilled a significant purpose of this work.

Springgay et al., (2004) have stressed the place and value of the reader in the research process: "In living inquiry, research is subjectively informed and subjectively co-produced. Viewers/readers take up where the artist(s)/author(s) left off, continuing the complex and multifarious act of meaning making" (p. 6).

I invite you, whole-heartedly, to do just that.

### Creative Synthesis

Data analysis was an aspect of this research that proved an ongoing struggle for me. In the spirit of inquiry as mentioned by Eisner (1997), I felt compelled to give voice to the learning and insights that this study evoked for me. Yet, given my original methodology, I found it a difficult task to find a form of analysis for which the principles coincided with the personal space from which I conducted this study.

I had intended to follow the more traditional technique of data analysis: developing themes within Tammy's narrative. I had planned to take a multi-staged approach to analyzing both structure and content through a series of steps (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Something about this approach gnawed at me though. Although Crabtree and Miller (1999) argue that this approach abides by the philosophy of holism, the very act of coding and categorizing seemed, to me, to take away from the *essence* of experience I was attempting to create. Essentially, I felt by taking on the task of creating codes and categories, I risked shaping outcomes based on my understanding of Tammy's story. I felt that this approach betrayed the power and knowledge of experience, placing a voice of authority above the voice of experience.

I finally paused and asked myself, "What is this research really about?" I answered, "It's about working together to create a story. It's about sharing the wisdom that is gained through experience. It's about helping the outside world to understand what it's like to live inside the life that is being portrayed." And then I decided to "step outside the box."

Interestingly, the same authors (Crabtree & Miller, 1999), whose techniques I had just shunned, offered within their same text an alternative to traditional methods of analysis, a method that aligns itself with the creative synthesis called for in heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). Crabtree and Miller describe a strategy they call "Immersion/Crystallization" (p. 179).

With Immersion/Crystallization, Crabtree and Miller advocate for the power of intuition and personal experience in analyzing data. The premise of Immersion/Crystallization is that deep insight evolves through the process of *living* the data, so to speak. Crabtree and Miller offer this explanation: "Immersion/ crystallization consists of cycles whereby the analyst immerses him or herself into the experiences of the text, emerging after concerned reflection with intuitive crystallizations, until reportable interpretations are reached" (p. 180). This said, the most important tool in undertaking Immersion/Crystallization is the self, a willingness to reflect and immerse oneself in the data.

The most difficult challenge I faced throughout the Immersion/ Crystallization process was defining the boundaries between Tammy's story and my own experiences. Because Tammy and I shared common experiences and beliefs, it was both a strength and a challenge in terms of uncovering meaning. At times my frustration grew as I remained stuck in my own story. Eventually, I found I could attain a sense of distance by stepping away from the transcripts for days, sometimes weeks. Indeed, many of my greatest insights came quite unexpectedly after fatigue and frustration led me to separate myself physically and emotionally from the data. To open myself to alternative meanings of Tammy's text, I also utilized my time reading theory that encouraged a variety of perspectives. This understanding, combined with my immersion in Tammy's story, resulted in the discovery of her own personal process that had obvious links and parallels to some of the literature cited within this study.

Rather than consisting of strategies used specifically for data analysis, Immersion/Crystallization encompasses the research process as a whole, beginning from the time one starts thinking about doing research until the final product is produced. Crabtree and Miller (1999) explore several different aspects of the Immersion/Crystallization process. These include personal reflexivity in developing a research topic

and then, once data collection begins, continual reflection on the research process and the influence of each individual involved.

Analysis, the product of personal insight or epiphanies, is drawn from key messages or thoughts that stand out in the data. These insights often occur during an actual interview which is a valuable aspect of encouraging a collaborative analysis. The researcher is able to immediately get the reaction of the participant being interviewed and thus involves her directly in the synthesis process.

Crabtree and Miller (1999) suggest a five-reading approach. The first approach is reading first for "key themes, emotions, and surprises" (p. 186). The second reading focuses on looking for deeper data to support themes picked up during the initial reading. The third reading looks for important insights that may have been missed or that do not fit into developing themes. During the fourth reading, the researcher's goal is to step outside her or himself to come up with different perspectives or understandings of the data. Finally, if discrepancies are found, the researcher reads the data a fifth time to determine if these perspectives can be linked. Ultimately, the resulting analysis develops through links or parallels within the data.

Although this process seems similar to the development of codes and themes, Immersion/Crystallization shares the authority of analysis with participants. Collaboration lies at the heart of Immersion/Crystallization. Participants continually find insight, and their reactions and inputs play an essential part in further developments. The philosophy underlying this approach is based on valuing personal experience. Immersion/Crystallization honours the voice of experience by emphasizing intuition, engagement, and fluidity. An essential factor in undertaking Immersion/Crystallization is that the researcher is totally engaged, cognitively and emotionally, in the data. Crabtree and Miller (1999) sum up the essence of Immersion /Crystallization in a simple, but daunting phrase, particularly in the realm of research: "Listen to your inner voice, experiment, experience!" (p. 194).

### Quality in Arts-based Research

As the lines between the arts and social sciences research become blurred, researchers confront questions into research quality and evaluation. As much of the recent literature on this topic acknowledges (Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Ceglowski, 1997; Eisner, 1997; Rinehart, 1998; Springgay, et al., 2004), questions of quality are still in the exploratory stages. A common denominator found in reviewing such literature is that quality in arts-based research is based on creating work that is engaging. "We believe that arts-based research will be judged, not so much by what it promises as by what it delivers -- its ideas, insights, values, and meanings" (Bochner & Ellis, 2003, p. 510).

### The Importance of Engagement in Art-Based Research

My ideas are candidates for others to entertain, not necessarily as truth, let alone Truth, but as positions about the nature and meaning of a phenomenon that may fit their sensibility and shape their thinking about their own inquiries (Peshkin cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, p. 135).

Clandinin and Connelly attest to the ability of creative inquiry to evoke questions and ideas at many levels. Richardson (cited in Ellis & Flaherty, 1992) states that the consequences of quality artistic representation advance insight and transformation into the life of the creator and viewer(s)/reader(s) of the work.

At a personal level, this study evoked insight and transformation both in understanding my own dynamics and those of the larger social forces surrounding me. Through the act of creating this evocative story, I found it essential to acknowledge how my own experiences, shaped within a larger cultural and political arena, also shaped my choice of representation. Indeed, my choice of topic was influenced by such factors. In reflecting on the questions I sought to answer, I acknowledged many of my own personal beliefs, for example the value of education, in shaping the focus of the research. Indeed, each time I approached Tammy in an effort to fill in the gaps I noted within her story, I was essentially interpreting these gaps from my own personal space. Essentially, I learned just as much about myself through this process as I did about Tammy!

That said, my choice of methodology also spoke to the personal and cultural influences surrounding me. The methodology I chose, in many ways, represents a desire to "color outside the lines"; to find my own voice within a political climate that is becoming more open to creative and individualized expression. In much the same way, quality in arts-based research should enlighten others to their own insights enabling the "questions the work raises for readers to reflect their own personal subtexts" (Richardson cited in Ellis & Flaherty, 1992, p. 354).

Such insight is gleaned when one engages in arts-based research. "Through the intertwining of concept and perception, we are able to create and recreate new possibilities and multiplicities of thought" (Slattery & Langerock, 2002, p. 354). Slattery and Langerock explain that when research is engaging it creates a visual picture through writing; it engages the senses and evokes emotion. It is through the use of aesthetics, both in content and form, that this is done.

Aesthetics refers to the pleasing and enriching quality of a text. Laine (2000) states, "The reader's capacity to be moved and enriched may be a testimony to the text's aesthetic quality" (p. 185). Not only does this understanding imply that the flow and structure of the text must be stimulating and enrapturing, but that it must be personally and passionately presented to evoke a deep emotional response among readers. It must appeal, in the words of Denzin and Lincoln (2000), to the "sensory and emotional experience" (p.742) of readers.

In terms of content, I utilized thick description, to create this visual picture. I purposefully chose the evocative forms of writing, autoethnography, and fiction, to engage readers in the emotional journey entailed within this research endeavor. Essentially I incorporated both forms of aesthetics to invite readers to contemplate the story's meaning to create their own meaning in a way that "spurs the imagination and ...encourages empathic forms of understanding" (Eisner, 1997, p. 261-162).

### Ethical Considerations and Participant Protection

I proceeded with this study only after I gained approval through the University of Saskatchewan Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioral Science Research.

To take part in this study, Tammy's responded to an advertisement for participants placed throughout a university campus. Tammy initially contacted me by email at which time we determined to speak over the phone. During this initial telephone call, I provided Tammy with a detailed description of the study, its purpose, and the manner in which I would collect data. I also informed her of her rights regarding confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Following this, we set a date for the first indepth interview.

I have maintained participant and third party protection and anonymity through the use of a pseudonym. I further guaranteed anonymity by eliminating and/or changing identifying details related to Tammy and third party individuals mentioned within this study. During our indepth interviews, I provided Tammy with further information, both verbally and within a written consent form (Appendix C). I asked Tammy to take part in this study on a voluntary basis only and assured her of the right to withdraw at any time, without negative ramification. Tammy was given and asked to review copies of her transcripts and the evocative story written. Her consent to release information was acknowledged by signing the Transcript Release Form (Appendix D). This study was straight forward and involved no deception of any kind.

With the written and verbal consent of Tammy, I audio recorded our indepth interviews to encourage accuracy and the transcription of the interview. During the process of data collection, and upon research completion, I secured all documentation gathered for the purpose of this research. This documentation will be stored for a period of five years by the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education as required by university regulations.

Encouraging participant collaboration during the process of data collection and analysis ensured the credibility of this research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Gall et al, 1996). We took time and effort to collaborate on the data and analysis, ensuring that Tammy's story reflected a truthful account of her experience. I verbally gave Tammy the opportunity to add, delete, or change the information provided during our indepth interviews. Tammy did request changes related to small factual details within her story. Overall, however, she felt that the story I had written reflected her feelings and experience in a way that pleased her. Once the data collection process was complete, I offered Tammy the opportunity to meet once again to debrief. Tammy did not feel that she needed an opportunity to debrief verbally. She did, however, email a response to several topics and questions that we discussed when we met. I have printed this response verbatim at the end of the story in Chapter 4. I also provided Tammy with my phone number and email address, ensuring her that if any concerns or questions arose during or after data collection she could contact me directly. Aside from the factual changes Tammy requested be made to the story and her emailed response sent to me, she did not have any other questions or concerns.

I offered Tammy the opportunity to seek professional counselling immediately when she felt she might need it. However, she did not experience any negative emotional consequences as a result of this



research.

## CHAPTER 4

### AN EVOCATIVE STORY

You are about to embark upon a journey that will take you along different paths. Along the way, you will meet Tammy, who served as the research participant for this study. You will read one story that begins in December 2002, when I first met Tammy face-to-face. This initial meeting was followed up by several phone and email conversations as well as one other intensive face-to-face meeting nearly one and a half years later. Aside from the stories collected from Tammy herself, pieces of this story provide insight into the history and experience of putting together this research endeavor. You will also hear my voice as I speak reflexively throughout the narrative. Along another path, you will also meet the "fictional" character of Tammy. Her experiences, while represented with fictional components, are based upon Tammy's real life experiences. They portray what I interpret as significant themes and events in Tammy's life that run through the story she has shared with me over the past year and a half. For you to differentiate between the research story and fictionalized accounts of Tammy's own experience, I have italicized the *fictional accounts of this story*.

I entered into this research experience assuming I would be challenged by this study and by the research methodology I had chosen. However, until I sat down with the intent to put my experiences on paper, I did not truly comprehend the complexity of the task before me. I made many frustrated attempts at creating this portion of my thesis before I felt I had finally paid homage to Tammy's story and my own journey up to this point. Tammy also played a major role in this portion of this research. Not only did she share her story with me, but she offered feedback throughout this process as I emailed her the work I had written. Following our second face-to-face meeting in May 2004, Tammy took the initiative to write a few of her own thoughts pertaining to her life experience and her experience as a research participant in this study. I have added her written thought, verbatim, as an epilogue to the story you are about to read.

It is my hope that, by taking you on this journey, you will be able to immerse yourself in the evolution of the many perspectives and stories within this research endeavor. My ultimate hope is that you, too, will actively join in this journey, forging your own path filled with emotions, ideas, and questions of your own.

I invite you now to follow me as I go back several years, to the place where this research endeavor was born.

#### My Life Meets Research: A Brief Introduction

The premise of my Master's thesis began taking shape while I was still working towards an undergraduate degree in Psychology. This was, in large part, because for me, my undergraduate experience was life altering. You see, up until I met my daughter for the first time, I had not considered any sort of long-term life direction. I lived life day by day, a lifestyle that often found me dealing with one crisis after another. Finding myself unexpectedly pregnant at the age of 22 was simply one of countless "messes" I had

gotten caught up in over a period of many years.

Motherhood changed me. Well, perhaps not motherhood, rather it was the foreign experience of loving another human being completely and unconditionally that changed me. The overwhelming emotions that I felt when I gave birth to my daughter caught me very much off guard. Motherhood was an experience that I had dreaded initially, scared and doubting my ability to be responsible for the life of another human being. Yet, when I looked in my daughter's eyes, I felt a certainty and safety I had never experienced before. I knew we would be okay, and for the first time I consciously entertained the thought that I was okay. How could I not be a valuable human being in my own right having brought such a miraculous being into the world?

In the weeks preceding the birth of my daughter, I decided to go back to school.. I was 23-years-old at the time. My own life experiences, particularly the fascinating personal changes that coincided with the birth of my daughter, left me with a passion to understand the mysterious nature of the human spirit. I chose psychology as a means of directing me towards greater understanding.

When my daughter was six-months-old, we left the safety of my family home and went out to begin a new life, mother and daughter. I soon recognized personal resources that, prior to motherhood, I had never attempted to discover, much less utilize. Almost immediately, I became incredibly responsible, not only in terms of meeting my daughter's needs, but my own. I found myself seeking well-being and empowerment on every level: physically, spiritually, socially, psychologically, and intellectually. The effects showed themselves almost immediately.

Physically, I developed strength and endurance through my ritual of regular running, weight training, and eating consciously. Academically, I excelled at university (a feat that I am sure would bring utter surprise to my high school teachers) earning several scholarships and honors throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies. Long-standing issues of avoidance and resentment were replaced with a sense of serenity and an understanding of how my former defense mechanisms served to create a cycle of self-destruction. This vision and the changes I embarked upon have brought long-lasting and honest friendships into my life, which have endured for nearly ten years. Spiritually, I developed beliefs surrounding my purpose in the world. I replace anger and victimhood with an understanding that the events and people in my life were given to me for my own higher learning. Yes, there was stress and periods when I felt as if I was sliding back into old patterns. Yet, the hardships always saw an end and as a result, only added to my own self-understanding and personal growth.

I lived an experience that I now name as resiliency, overcoming a variety of risks throughout my life. I felt driven to understand this aspect of myself and others. During my undergraduate years, I forged friendships with other single-mothers who shared similar experiences. And so, my passion focused itself on this specific group of individuals. What truly fascinated me, however, were the women I knew who had given birth during their adolescent years. As I listened to their stories and reflected on my own, often turbulent, quest to discover myself in adolescence, I felt awed when I heard their experiences of navigating through boyfriends, parents, and high school, all the while having a "baby on board." I did not, and do not,

believe to this day, that I could have faced the challenge of lone-motherhood and university at an age any younger than I did.

I had a deep and burning desire to learn more about the lives of such women, to understand how they propelled themselves through adolescence as mothers and later through university. I wanted to honor them by providing an outlet through which similar stories could be told and celebrated. A few years later, in the form of my graduate thesis, I would find myself fulfilling this passionate quest. Tammy, a full-time university student, who had become a mother during her final year in high school, would offer me the gift of her time and experience. This is where our story, mine and Tammy's, begins.

### Participants Needed

Tammy was not the first potential participant that I made contact with. As it came to be, however, she was the first that met the criteria to become involved in this study. The process of finding participants depleted my energy, and I grew doubtful that women fitting my participant criteria would contact me. My introduction to Tammy changed all of that, though. Her story, passion for life, and commonalities with my own experience helped me to regain the original energy and passion I felt for this research endeavor.

Tammy first contacted me in November 2002, in response to an ad for participants that I had placed at a university daycare. I emailed her back to ask whether she would feel comfortable if I phoned her to talk to her more about my research. She replied that she didn't mind talking over the phone. When I called Tammy two days later, I thought that, perhaps, she expressed herself more eloquently than any person I had met before. Her voice was soft, yet certain, and she expressed herself with a clarity and flow that left me enthralled to find out more about the woman on the other end of the phone.

We spoke for quite some time as she provided me a history of the circumstances surrounding the birth of her first and second children and her current status as a full-time university student. She stated that her interest in the study reflected her desire to provide hope and inspiration to other women with experiences similar to hers. I learned over the course of this and one other phone conversation that her experience as a mother included raising a child with Asperger's Syndrome, that she found comfort and strength in her life as a lone-mother, and that this comfort was hard-earned, following several years of struggle and heartbreak. This brief, yet harrowing, introduction to Tammy was one that months earlier would have found me pouncing at the opportunity to narrate a story of resilience. However, I must take you back in time, once again, to the story of how this research evolved. As it did, my vision for this research, once clear, became blurred.

Several years after my initial passion for my research project was born, after spending much of my two years in my master's program developing a firm knowledge base in relation to adolescent mothers and resiliency, I found myself sitting in front of my thesis committee. It was time to defend the research I was proposing. I sat among three advisors, two women and one man, all of whom had come from different backgrounds, all of whom held their own individual perspective on the topic I was proposing. Despite my anxiety over this process, I found myself easing into the sense of fellowship created within that tiny room.

Throughout the course of the next few hours, in a conversational style, the ideas I proposed were rotated in an array of varying directions. Ultimately, aspects of this wonderful learning experience afforded me both a sense of disappointment and excitement over the possibilities for this research. It brought forth theoretical explorations quite contrary to the notion of resiliency that I had proposed. I was resistant and drawn to these societal, critical, and feminist-based notions at the same time. My desire was to emphasize and explore stories of individual resilience. Yet, another, larger reality was presented to me that day. It was founded on the premise that despite individual efforts to overcome adversity, society itself creates this adversity and often presents individuals with barriers that individual strength alone has little power to conquer.

My own life had changed in the past few years, and despite an incessant yearning to focus on individual resilience, these changes made it hard to deny that the greatest of challenges lay, not within me, but beyond me.

One of the most glaring of these realities, for me, was the hypocrisy between government efforts to alleviate the financial destitution so commonly faced by lone-mothers and ever-increasing tuition fees and student-loan debt loads. I have heard, first hand, many misconceptions pertaining to the financing of my post secondary education based on my lone-mother status. These include comments suggesting that single mother status entitles us to “free education.” Although I have been provided a certain amount of forgiveness in terms of my student loans, even with forgiveness and scholarships my student loan currently stands at over \$80,000. It is a looming reality that creates the single largest source of stress in my life. At times I question whether following academic and career dreams has actually damaged my hope for a secure and poverty-free future. In actuality, I may have been farther ahead financially had I remained in low-paying and unfulfilling jobs. Essentially, however, I chose to pursue my academic dreams and focus on the pursuit of personal fulfillment while I studied and determined to worry about debt later. Now student loans have become a focus. I wondered if other women followed the same line of thinking and had the same experience of increased stress regarding student loans as time went on.

Aside from this issue of financial debt are other challenges I have met that I have little, if any, control over. As I stepped beyond the safety of my undergraduate community, I was met head on by many of the negative sentiments related to lone-mothers, an attitude particularly true, in my work with at-risk families. I hear exclamations of mother-blame on a daily basis: holding mothers responsible for the challenging behaviors of their children. It is with shame, that I, too, despite a conscious awareness of such beliefs, sometimes find myself falling prey to them. On a more personal level, I have also found that respect for my educational efforts has evolved into an increasingly apparent outside pressure to focus on creating a “real” family, now that my days of studying are behind me. Often, it feels to me as if others look at my life and family as one that is lacking completeness.

Essentially, what began as an excited sense of passion to revel in individual stories of resilience has also become a quest to reveal, ultimately, how society dishonors these stories of courage and often strips young, lone-mothers of the stability and fulfillment many struggle hard to attain.

And so, when I first listened to Tammy, I hung up the phone feeling truly torn. Like an oil and vinegar dressing, my optimism and pessimism for this research refused to dissolve easily into each other. I was elated to hear her sense of personal triumph and excited to write and share her story of resilience with others. Yet, I was saddened by the notion that, in all likelihood, I would take these same pieces of her story and place them within a tainted, larger, and harsher reality, a reality that Tammy, unfortunately, has little, if any, control over, and one, that she would, no doubt, confront if she has not already.

Tammy and I agreed, over the course of our phone conversation, to meet in person to go over issues of confidentiality and proceed with an in-depth interview. This meeting would not take place immediately, however, because Tammy had final exams looming over the course of the next month. The month between talking to Tammy over the phone and meeting her in person allowed both of us time to reflect on what was to come. I emailed Tammy a copy of the guiding questions I would ask when we met and spent my own time reflecting on how I was feeling about what I did know about her already.

Aside from struggling with theoretical issues, I also found myself dealing with a personal dilemma that closely tied itself to the methodologies and rationale that guided this research. I connected so strongly to what little I already did know about Tammy that I grew concerned and preoccupied by my fascination. More and more I began to question my motives for pursuing this line of research.

Essentially, I felt almost suffocated by an impending sense of narcissism. Because so much of what Tammy had told me coincided with my own undergraduate experience and beliefs that I held during this time, I began to question whose story I would, ultimately, be writing: mine or Tammy's?

I devoted much of the month preceding our interview to self-reflection. I talked to myself. I talked to my thesis advisor. I imagined myself talking to Tammy. Over and over again, I played out scenes in my mind of the interview that had yet to take place.

Throughout it all, I wrote. I wrote and wrote, my solace and way of making sense of my thoughts, my world, and my experience in it. My personal writings ultimately birthed the realization that any of my self-reflections that would result from my meeting with Tammy would be an opportunity for increased self-awareness. This self-awareness, I realized, would benefit my readers. By acknowledging my personal feelings and experiences, I felt I, and you, would be much more capable of deciphering the line between Tammy's reality and my own or, in the very least, acknowledging how my own life would influence my understanding of Tammy's story. I offer you now, bits and pieces of my personal journal writings that guided me through and beyond my concerns related to narcissism.

*Somebody once told me that I think too much. It wasn't a revelation to me, but it made me sense negativity about an aspect of myself that I had always honored. Funny how now, this simple phrase plays itself over and over again in my head. Do I live inside myself too much? Is it bringing unnecessary confusion to this work? On the other hand, if I step away from who I am,*

*from my experience, can I truly understand the story Tammy will tell? Is it possible to be me, honor my wisdom, and, at the same time, honor the experience and knowledge that Tammy will share as well?*

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*I wonder if it's too late to do a quantitative study?*

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*What is this battle with myself really about? Could it be that I have a vision for this work and I am frightened that it will not be found through others? What do I want to hear, do I want to discover that I am afraid I will not find by listening to other voices? I think it may be I am frightened by the reality that there may not be straight-forward answers in a place I seek to find them. It could very well be that the work I must do is to find a sense of comfort in the unknown. And perhaps, what I am learning now is that it is okay to feel confused and afraid and to honor these feelings for the lessons they will bring.*

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*This confusion and anxiety is not horrible. It is creating awareness. It is acknowledging who I am, and by doing this, I can more fully acknowledge who Tammy is as well.*

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*Today I feel ready.*

#### Meeting Face to Face

When Tammy and I finally meet in person for the first time, it is the beginning of December, and as I near the crescent where Tammy lives, I fight hard to centre my thoughts that the Christmas season tends to scatter every year. Amidst the Christmas list I feverishly scroll in my mind and the pile of work I need to complete before holidays is a nervousness about meeting Tammy for the first time. What will her first impression of me be, I wonder? Will we connect? Can I pull out of myself, put my thoughts aside long enough to live within her story for the next few hours of my life?

My tension grows, and at the same time wanes, as I pull onto Tammy's block. I feel nervous about meeting and interviewing Tammy, yet I am comforted by a sense of familiarity as I encounter the rows of townhouses that line her street. I am pulled back to a time, three years earlier, when I lived in a townhouse very similar to Tammy's. It was a content and safe time for me, and I feel a sense of coming home. I find

myself torn between the solace of sentiment and the reality of the research interview I will begin with Tammy in the next few minutes.

The first thing that strikes me when I enter Tammy's home is the smell. The scent of fresh baked cookies hangs in the air. I almost expect that any moment now my grandma, twelve years dead and a foot shorter than me, will squeeze me with the might of a bear and pinch my rosy freckled ten-year-old cheeks. This can not be the fortress of a woman younger than me who birthed her first child at the age of 18. I feel strangely incompetent and undomesticated and secretly hope that the smell is the result of pre-made Pillsbury cookie rolls.

The home Tammy has made for herself and her two children feels as cozy as it smells. I am immediately greeted at the door by a vibrant tiny soul with deer-like eyes and a bobbed dark trestle of hair. As I step through the front door and into the living room, I am surrounded by images of this child whose squeaky child-like voice and tiny size do not seem to match the well-formed words and sentences that fly quickly, almost excitedly from her mouth. With the exception of the huge front room windows that succumb to a large, definitely child-decorated Christmas tree, I am surrounded by a barrage of pictures on each of the living room walls. Tammy's son is not home, but years worth of 8 x 10 school photos lend me a brief snap shot of his life. His pictures are accompanied by several portraits of Tammy and her children. I sense immediately that family, motherhood, will be central to Tammy's story. Although I make the assumption that the Christmas season has lent itself to the cozy atmosphere that I encounter, my future visit to Tammy's home left me with the impression that the warmth I am surrounded by roams the walls of Tammy's three-bedroom duplex as if it is a fourth family member.

Several minutes later we stride into the kitchen and my insecurities over my lack of culinary skills are redeemed when Tammy hands her daughter a perfectly round cookie with the face of Rudolf dead center. I thank god for Pillsbury as Tammy leads her daughter back into the living room to entertain herself with toys and a children's channel on TV.

Tammy herself is not what I have pictured in my mind. Her few minutes in the living room allow me time to reflect on the predetermined expectations I had about what Tammy would look like physically. I had two phone conversations with her before our first meeting. The tone of her voice, eloquent speaking manner, along with her personal history lead me to believe Tammy will be more high-maintenance, for lack of a better phrase. It is an unfortunate realization that I, a person intent on advocating for adolescent mothers, stereotyped her in a physical way. I was expecting make-up, streaked hair, and low-rise blue jeans. What I get is a very relaxed woman who presents au naturel, long straight blonde, air-dried hair, a fresh, make-up free face, sweats and a tee-shirt. I am the one who has, in fact, done herself up for this occasion. Fortunately, this realization hits me immediately and recognition of my expectations is exactly what I feel I need to open my mind to realities other than my own.

Tammy and I sit together, face to face, at her kitchen table talking for two hours, interrupted at times by her daughter's request for more cookies. It is a comfortable feeling for me despite my anxieties prior to meeting Tammy. I find myself feeling at home in her kitchen, wallpapered in inspirational quotes



and childhood works of art. The large window to the right of me brings the warmth of the winter sun along with visions of her bubbly little four-year-old frolicking in the backyard carpeted in toys and snow. Tammy's personal presence feels as welcoming to me as her home. Upon meeting her, I sense she has a very subtle demeanor. Over the course of the next year and a half, I will grow to appreciate what I sense is power in her gentle and well-thought out means of presenting herself and her story.

I begin our interview with a set of open-ended questions that I offered to Tammy for review in the weeks before we met. Though I sense Tammy is conscious of time, having plans later that afternoon, her answers are purposeful. She does not rush into any topic without beginning with a clear and thoughtful silence. She often pauses throughout the course of telling her story. However, her silences seem meaningful, as if interrupting them with my own thoughts and words would discourage the insight and messages she was developing. I come to perceive the silences as symbolic of the way this woman lives her life, thoughtfully and deliberately, with careful reflection. I also come to view this silence as a tribute to the way Tammy tends to focus most of our interview on the present. I admire her conscious efforts to live in the here and now.

Despite this admiration, I feel a desire to understand how Tammy's life has shaped her ability to ground herself in the moment and ask questions, not on my list, that encourage her to go back farther than where she chooses to begin her story, with the birth of her second child, her four-year-old daughter. Although the focus of this research is on exploring her experience of university, my interview with Tammy leaves me with the understanding that her experience is one piece of a much larger picture.

#### Now and Then: Personal Reflections

I am listening, once again, to the taped conversation between Tammy and myself. It's been close to two months since our initial, fresh-baked cookie smell meeting took place in her home. Two months have seen the seemingly endless dumping of several incomplete writings into a computer file that I have named "Maybe Next Time." Two months and what feels like a lifetime worth of frustration and internal conflict in attempting to find a meeting place for the words I put on paper and the words Tammy spoke the day we met. Despite the trial and error, each time I sit and let Tammy's voice speak to me again, I fill with an energy that keeps me up far beyond the 11 p.m. deadline I set for myself. So, I think tonight, maybe this will be it. Maybe tonight I will open a new computer file and name it the "This Time It's For Keeps" file. And then I am interrupted by another thought that asks, "What is it about Tammy, her story, her life, that keeps me from getting my eight hours?"

In my quest for answers I find myself, once again, pushing the rewind button on my audio tape player.

I am listening, once again, to the taped conversation between Tammy and myself. Funny, I think, I don't remember being cognizant of the sounds that play themselves out, quite loudly, in the background of our taped conversation. A child's voice chirps relentlessly amidst the sounds of, perhaps Barney, singing in the background? Yes, it's Barney, the big purple dinosaur. How could I not be conscious of the all-to-

familiar Barney theme song?

What was it that was holding my attention I wonder, flipping through a disorganized array of transcripts, field notes, and personal reflections? I realize Tammy had me at the get go. From the opening question of our interview, "If you were asked to write a story describing what experiences led you to pursue a university education, where would you begin?" Tammy drew me into her world and in and out of my own.

### Introducing Motherhood

*My name is Tammy. I am 17-years-old. It's funny how after being alive for 17 years, three minutes can suddenly feel like forever. I kiss mom and dad good-bye as they leave for the evening. Once I have watched them drive away, assured that they are gone, I walk slowly, purposefully towards my bedroom and dig beneath a mound of socks and underwear. I find what I am looking for and pull it out of my drawer. It is amazing, I think, how such a tiny, white piece of plastic can hold so much power. I wonder what will be going through my mind the next time I look at my mother's face. Will I wait anxiously for her to arrive home, just so that I can hug her in celebration of a secret she will never have to become privy too? Or will I wait, filled with anxiety, grasping for words that, no matter how many times I rehearse them, will never be the right ones?*

*I open the box and unwrap the tiny white piece of plastic. In the past hour I have drunk three large glasses of water in preparation for this moment. One part of me is angry that I have worked so hard to prepare. That part of me is screaming and crying and begging with me to hold off for just a little while longer. There is another part of me, a strong, determined part, a part of me I hate and love at the same time, that states in a very stern and matter-of-fact voice "it's time to get it done." This part of me wins. Before I know it, I lean forward, my bum hanging over the toilet as I pee on that tiny white piece of plastic.*

*In the course of the next three minutes, I experience what I think a dying person must go through in their last few minutes of life. My life, all 17 years, flash before me. Near the end of my life review I see my life as it was a few short hours, days, months ago. I am standing outside myself somehow. I see a beautiful young woman, with long flowing blonde hair and perfectly proportioned features. Her physical beauty has handed her certain luxuries in life that few have the opportunity to experience. There are cameras surrounding her, snapping pictures of a face that is deemed worthy of being placed on public display. Her beauty finds her surrounded by countless admirers. She is caught up in a world of spontaneity, money, lust, and parties. And there is one night, particularly, that comes to mind. She recalls, with a remorse that leaves a gaping pit in the bottom of her stomach, that one fleeting moment housed within her past 17 years. She barely knew him, can barely see his face in her mind's eye. How could something, so impulsive and meaningless at the time, find her here, now, feeling utterly devastated?*

*And I see a woman whose external attributes are matched by the power she feels within. She has determined her own path, broke with tradition in many ways. She is in the army reserves, training to defend her country from war; the only woman among 19 people to graduate from her platoon. The strength and*

*speed she emits seem an unlikely match for her tiny physical frame.*

*Her mind is sharp, intellect strong. She knows it will serve her well in life. Yet, life is now and the options seem so limitless and time so bountiful that her plans to finish high school and someday earn a university degree can wait... She has it all this beautiful, strong and intelligent 17-year-old. Yes, life, it seems, is hers for the taking.*

*If it wasn't for that one night...*

*And then, my three minutes are up. My mouth feels dry. There is a lump of anxious nothingness caught in the back of my throat making it difficult to swallow. In the final seconds I throw out a quick prayer and find myself making promises never to have sex again, if only I am given one more chance. I guess whoever is listening knows it is a promise made in vain.*

As Tammy describes her unplanned introduction to motherhood, I find myself easily swept back in time and understanding when she states "Probably Grade 11 things started sliding. Right around that time I got interested in partying and hanging around people; typical Grade 11 stuff..... So, I really lost interest in school very quickly." Tammy was a model and a member of the army reserves when she discovered her pregnancy. Motherhood, Tammy tells me, did not fit into the spontaneous and fast-paced lifestyle she was living at the age of 17. In fact, her son, Tammy acknowledges, was conceived as the result of a one-night stand that she thought little of until she became aware of the implications of the encounter.

Despite the devastation that Tammy's feels upon discovering her pregnancy, there is never any doubt in her mind that she will keep her child. Upon subsequent conversations with Tammy, I learn that she is the youngest of five children. I also learn that she has only recently met her niece, born to her older sister who gave her child up for adoption. It is a piece of her story that helps me to understand Tammy's decision to have and raise her child.

"I had a sister who was 16 when she got pregnant and she gave her baby up for adoption and then years later found out she couldn't have children anymore. So, I decided I wasn't going to go through that heartache." Tammy goes on to speak about her developing relationship with her adopted niece who Tammy now keeps in regular contact with through email and whom she describes as very much like her. "She turned out to be a single mother as well and she's raising a daughter who's just a few months older than my daughter. She just finished her fourth year of psychology."

Essentially, there is never any question in Tammy's mind that she will raise her child, despite the unexpectedness of her pregnancy. Although she explains that her pregnancy was the result of a one-time encounter with a man barely knew, she initially clung to the hope that he would provide some form of support for Tammy and their child.

When we explore this aspect of her life together, Tammy utilizes an example of an autodrama she did in a university drama class. She explains this to me as a dramatic portrayal of her life. Tammy explains that she chose to express her life in terms of a journey of sorts: a train ride. One stop along her life, Tammy tells me, is her first pregnancy. In Tammy's words, "I felt lost at that point. You know, I thought, what am I

going to do now? So, I turned to look at [my son's] father and said 'are you coming with me?' and when I realized he wasn't, I exit kind of lost, not knowing what I am going to do."

Tammy explains further that although she realized all along that her relationship with her son's father was not a committed one, the fear and disappointment she was already experiencing was exasperated by the fact that he denied paternity. Following this, Tammy turned inward to search for answers during a very dark period that, Tammy tells me, felt all-consuming at that point in her life.

Tammy explains to me, that through her connections with the army reserves she is aware that her son's father is now married with five children. He has never initiated contact with her son despite having avenues by which he could contact him. I search for signs of bitterness or resentment as Tammy speaks, but I find none. I do find what I interpret are the last remnants of her efforts to understand how this man could not want to know the son that she loves so dearly. There is the quiet acknowledgment of what she is expecting soon: her son will question his father's absence in his life.

Tammy acknowledges that, in nearly all respects, her experience of being young and unexpectedly pregnant was a very frightening and lonely period in her life. This dark time was cloaked in her sense of being misunderstood by those closest to her. "My pregnancy was tough. I realized I was old enough and responsible enough to handle motherhood but my parents continued to parent me and treat me like I was 15. It was very stressful and I had no support outside of them."

As Tammy moves forward in her story, as she has done so in her life, I am moved by the picture I have of this woman who, when met by life's challenges, sets her sights ahead of her and trudges full-force right through her challenges. Her memories of being a young, pregnant woman emphasize her quest to move forward, not quite sure where life will take her next, guided primarily by the intense sense of meaning that motherhood has brought to Tammy's life.

### Baby Makes Two

*After months of confusion, of swinging between a love and hatred for my growing body and what it symbolizes, my body pushes out a beautiful, healthy baby boy. The pain of giving birth and craziness of monitors and doting nurses is forgotten as my newborn son is placed into my arms. Mom is standing beside me and for a moment I tear my gaze away from my son to look up at her. There is a smile on her face and tears in her eyes. Silently, I thank the same, faceless listener I spoke to in my bathroom nine months earlier, for unanswered prayers. At 18-years-old, I am a mother. I spend the first hours of my son's life drowning in exploration of his surreal little body, too tiny and perfect to be real. And I know I will do and try anything in my power to take care of my child.*

Motherhood brings dramatic changes to Tammy's perspective on life and priorities. She had turned 18 by the time her son was born. "I grew up very fast, almost over night... I dropped out of the military and then realized very quickly I needed a grade 12 education if I was going to get a minimum wage job. So, very shortly, not even a month, two weeks after I had my son, I was back in high school."

Despite being the same age as many of her classmates at this time, Tammy's perspective on life and reasons for being at school were different from many of those around her. "There were no more parties for me and skipping class and stuff like that. I was there to get my classes under my belt; to get good marks... I think I had more in common with my teachers than with my classmates," she explains, laughing.

Aside from her subtle sense of being 'outside the norm' as Tammy completed her high school education, she describes her experience as a fairly easy one, attributing much of her success to the support of her parents. "I was still living with them [my mom and dad] then so it wasn't a problem keeping my son with mom while I went to school. Really, it was pretty painless."

Tammy's changed perspective on parenthood was mirrored by that of her parents' one-time pessimism regarding the situation. "My mom was my labor coach when I was in labor and when I came home with [my son], they doted on him. They loved him. They were thrilled. My mom helped out a lot and my dad, you know, he enjoyed having him around too."

Being a mother and providing her son with a positive upbringing was a central focus for Tammy. Yet, the path she would choose in doing so was less certain. Tammy describes the years following the birth of her son as a period of searching. Again, in referring to her autodrama, Tammy states that her next train stop, following pregnancy, is symbolic of the years following the birth of her son. She describes 'boarding the train' with a sense of desperation to find a destination.

Throughout this portion of her story, Tammy takes me on an exhaustive, roller coaster ride of her life in the years following her son's birth. She is challenged to present this portion of her life to me in chronological order, as reflective bits and pieces come up when I present her with different questions throughout our time together.

I learn that after graduation from high school Tammy goes on to earn a college certificate in the field of radio announcing. After college she works in her chosen profession for two months and then, dissatisfied with her career, she quits this job. Over the next several years she barely maintains her livelihood by working minimum-wage jobs. Tammy explains that when her son was five-years-old, she once again enrolls in college. However, life in the media industry is difficult for Tammy. "I loved that job, but it wasn't family friendly. You have to move a lot with that job and it was a frantic pace of life... plus the money was not good. So, I knew I had to open up some other options. I had to do something different."

Above and beyond this less than family friendly career, the out-of-province relocation that was necessary to pursue a college diploma in this field found Tammy faced with the added challenge of finding reliable and trustworthy childcare. After quitting this job, Tammy again relocated back to her home province, close to the support of her parents. Once again, she sustained herself and her son by working several low-paying and unrewarding jobs. Ultimately, Tammy's struggle as a lone-mother to meet the basic needs of herself and her son admittedly found her caught in a cycle of unfulfilling and what she states were "poor" life choices.

Half an hour into our first interview a tiny figure whose voice chimes "mommy" enters the kitchen and Tammy excuses herself momentarily to tend to her daughter's needs. I push pause on the audio

tape and determine I will take the next several minutes to observe the more minute details of this room, assuming, by its sentimental décor, it will allow me a deeper look into the soul of this woman and her family.

But, I am side tracked, during this lull in our first visit, by a sense that I am 'missing something.' It is a dull and knowing, intuitive feeling and I am unable to make anything concrete out of it. The few moments that I have to reflect do not provide me with enough time to process the feeling and to understand its meaning. As voices break away and Tammy emerges, alone, from the living room, I doodle a question mark onto my loose-leaf as a reminder not to tuck this sensation too far out of my mind's reach.

What does it mean? I wonder in the weeks following my first interview with Tammy. I listen to the taped conversation between Tammy and myself in an effort to take me back to Tammy's kitchen table, to the feelings that left me perplexed on that day. I do not find the answers that I am seeking. I hold the piece of loose-leaf in my hands, drawing it in close to my face as if doing so will bring the answers closer too. It does not. I grow increasingly frustrated. Perhaps my dreams will bring me insight.

I shut off my computer and go to bed.

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Tammy, whose body seems to float through the air with as much grace as her voice, lightly touches back down onto her chair and immediately returns her focus to our conversation. We review the discussion that took place before Tammy left the kitchen table. Tammy tells me that she feels ready to move on and so, we begin to explore some of the benefits and high points that Tammy's experiences have offered to her life. Once again, Tammy weaves back and forth through time in explaining the basis of her current experience. Being a university student, she tells me, has helped her to overcome the self-doubt that was instilled during the trials following her son's birth.

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Yet again, I am stalled here. Somewhere in the course of moving forward in her story, Tammy glances over a piece of her life that is left unexplored and I find difficult to continue writing where Tammy leaves off. I feel stuck at this place for a very long time.

The past several nights have found me battling a severe case of writer's block. There is no flow to the story of my meeting with Tammy; only short, thwarted attempts to make sense of my thoughts that are so scattered that they would make no sense to you were I to transmit them onto this paper. So, perhaps I need to focus, not on the story, but on my thoughts of Tammy herself.

On that day I met Tammy I was struck by her groundedness. She seemed so serene and focused on the positive aspects of her life in the here and now. Yet, the more I reflect, the more I realize how, time and again, Tammy carried her past into the present. Not in a bitter way or a way that kept her "stuck" in the past. When she spoke of people and situations related to her pain and her struggles, she spoke almost entirely with an air of non-judgmental observation. Her purpose seemed not to "vent" or to place blame; rather the pieces of her past were offered as insight into her current perspective.

As I sit with this realization, an overwhelming sense of relief encompasses me. I feel as if, finally,

I am discovering what tugged at me that day. What is preventing me today, from forging ahead? I am beginning to understand the meaning of the question mark scrawled on loose leaf. This is where our story will continue.

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I tuck my empathy and understanding of Tammy's struggles following her son's birth into one simple phrase, "It sounds like you had a period when things were really tough for you." However, the response that Tammy provides to this comment leaves me feeling as if I have just been punched in the stomach. Seemingly out of nowhere, Tammy discloses her experience within an abusive marriage. It is a marriage that took place when her son was four-years-old. It is a detail neglected in her prior description of her life between the birth of her son and her daughter nearly eight years later.

Her sudden mention of this detail is brief. She states only, "It was horrible and I stayed way too long. I guess he eroded a lot of my self-confidence with the emotional abuse. I wasn't feeling very good about myself for quite a while." Following this comment I probe her further, but my effort to gain an understanding of how this abuse has shaped her current experience is met with a reiterated description of the financial struggles she faced as a lone-mother.

Ultimately, during this first visit to Tammy's, I step away from this line of questioning honoring Tammy's decision to focus on other aspects of her life. However, throughout the remainder of our time together, I remain stuck, somehow, in a sense of disbelief and anger for the abuse she has endured. It is a stunning realization for me to think that this slight and gentle woman has endured such a harsh and brutal reality.

I am also haunted by a desire to understand what Tammy's presentation means in light of this detail. In the brief moment that she shares this aspect of her life, she offers subtle words that suggest the pain she has experienced. However, I am perplexed by her lack of emotional undertones or physical clues she puts forth. For as Tammy shares this information with me, her stature remains as steady and as calm as her relaxed facial expression, her tone of voice is as fluent and as gentle as ever.

The time I spend, over the next year and a half, communicating with Tammy and immersing myself in her story brings a greater sense of comfort in broaching the subject of her abusive marriage. And so, when we meet in May 2004, I ask her to speak to this experience. In reliving the details, Tammy remains composed. However, it is not until her story reaches her point of departure from this marriage that the lightness in Tammy's voice returns. She speaks of her experience in a way that I can only describe as sullen.

#### Struggling to Survive: Tammy's Experience of Marriage

*I am sitting alone on the edge of our bed. There is a lump in my throat that plugs a scream that has etched itself in the pit of my very being. If it were not for the blanket of numbness that has completely engulfed me, I would find tears. I suppose it may be shock that after only three weeks of marriage, he has informed me that he does not love me anymore. Somewhere, amidst these swarming thoughts that ask*

*"How can this be happening? Where will we go? What will we do?" is my mother's voice. I am certain that I see her outstretched finger materialize, shaking itself in front of my nose. "We told you not to marry him. He's no good."*

*The finger dissolves and I am shaken back to reality by the slam of the door. I sit quietly, still stunned listening for the sound of the truck engine. He pulls away and as if knowing it is safe to make his presence known, my son calls to me from his room. I am a woman whose hopes and dreams for the future have been dashed in a matter of minutes. I am also a mother. And so, I rise and walk towards my son's room. With a sense of uncertainty I determine to make it through this day as all the others.*

*No 'outsiders' are allowed in. There are days when I wish that one of the few vehicles traveling this isolated road will stop to ask directions or run out of gas, just for the chance to have a conversation with someone other than myself and my young son. We will share many memorable times together today, me and my son. We will laugh and dance together, while inside I will cry and, I fear, dissolve to a point in which breathing will become a chore. I will work hard, once again, to make my husband happy. Childish voices will have long been put to bed when he finally stumbles through the door and a warm meal will sit waiting for him with the hope I will not be scorned while I watch the meal I have prepared find its way to the trash can. It is sad that even the most derogatory of words has become a longing for acknowledgment of my existence.*

As I look back over hours worth of transcripts etched from my conversations with Tammy, I feel as if something significant stands out when I ask her to speak about her marriage experience. In uncharacteristic fashion she speaks, transcribed in nearly a full page of single spaced print, without pause. No other experience or conversation piece, in all our hours of conversation, takes place in quite the same style as this. For the countless minutes that she focuses on this piece of her life, she lets go of her tendency to thoughtfully reflect on what she is saying. Her words simply pour from her mouth as if escaping, as Tammy finally did, from her marriage.

Tammy describes her growing sense of self-depletion as she encounters social isolation, as well as verbal and psychological abuse. Tammy stays in her marriage for over a year, despite the fact she is frequently told that her husband harbors no feelings for her. She is frequently scorned for not contributing monetarily to the marriage. However, her efforts to find work are also met with hostility and a refusal to support such an endeavor. Tammy explains that for a portion of the marriage, the family lives on a desolate acreage and she has no transportation or financial means to leave her home. She knows no one, having relocated to an unfamiliar town upon marrying. Her family discouraged her marriage to this man from the beginning. Thus, Tammy speaks of her reluctance to reach out to her parents for support even when her situation seems unbearable.

In retrospect, though this is a painful time in Tammy's life, it also exemplifies a belief that Tammy will reflect upon throughout her story: The belief that certain people and situations are provided to each of us at opportune times.



## Gifts and New Beginnings

*I feel like a child waking up on Christmas morning when we take that final trip from the 'prison' to our new home in town. It feels like the beginning of a new life for me. My mind, over the weeks preceding the move, takes me to a wonderful place full of afternoon coffee visits with other moms, walks to the park, and impromptu trips up town for the mail and groceries. Like my vision of marriage, however, this fantasy is dashed, it seems, the minute we walked through the door. As I make my way excitedly through the rooms of our new home painting pictures in my mind of how each will look decorated, his voice soon invades my place of sanctuary. He simply snarled and looked at me in disdain as he speaks words that I thought could no longer cut through my numbed soul, "I've got things to do. I'll be back later."*

*There is a point when I cannot account for the days of the week. They all seem to mesh together in my life that drones on into one long season of loneliness and dashed hopes. My soul whispers to me at times when I bask in the wonder of my son's new accomplishments and during the many hours when I tend to the garden that soon comes to take up much of my backyard. There are few yards, I am sure, that have ever bragged so many vegetables and flowers. I fit them into any and every piece of earth that I can dig up.*

*As I lose myself in my newly found place of serenity, her voice chimes out over the fence that divides our yards and our lives. "I can't stand to spy through my fence at this yard anymore without meeting the person responsible for all those flowers!" I look up to greet her eyes peering at me from over the top of the fence and I would swear there is an angelic aura enveloping the top of her head. It seems in this instant I recognized her importance in my life.*

*Gardening soon becomes not only my escape but my connection to the outside world. I am quite certain we do not see each other more than two or three times, top to bottom, over the course of the next several weeks. I maintain loyalty to an unwritten rule that I am not to venture outside the confines of this fence. Her numerous invitations for coffee go declined and while she does not ask questions, her eyes speak to me of her understanding. And so, despite her many declined invitations I never doubt that our backyard friendship would continue.*

*As the weeks pass and we share our words and our faces with each other, over the fence, our connection deepens. I do not feel shock or surprise this sunny Saturday morning when her understanding makes the journey from her eyes to her mouth. "If you want to leave," she states, "we'll help. You just pick the day". "How about Monday?" I reply.*

Tammy's experience draws to a close as she explains how her next door neighbour friend backed into her driveway on a Monday morning with a horse trailer to help her pack up and leave. Her face expresses forlorn as I ask what became of this friendship. "I never made contact again," she explains. "I feel bad, but it was just too hard for me to go back."

I am not surprised when Tammy tells me that her husband made several attempts to convince her to come back to the marriage. Nor am I surprised, in coming to know Tammy, that she makes a very

purposeful effort to overcome impulse, at times, to return. "One of the first things I did when I left was sign a one year lease for an apartment. Soon after I enrolled in broadcasting college so that I had a second commitment that I was tied to."

As we gently lull ourselves into new territory, the door bell rings. The interruption allows me to come back into my own physical space and acknowledge my now, very full bladder. Tammy informs me that she is expecting her parents to stop in briefly and as she rises to answer the door, I ask her permission to use her washroom. She directs me up the stairwell off her kitchen and to the left and for the next few minutes we go our separate ways.

I am greeted by a bathroom much like my own. Children's bath toys lie in disarray around the edge of the bathtub. Her sink is lined with everyday bathroom products and the pleasant fruity smell leaves me assuming Tammy and I both appreciate unwinding in a warm, relaxing bubble bath. I hear the muffled sound of delighted squeals that become more pronounced as I open the bathroom door and make my way back downstairs. There I am warmly greeted by Tammy's parents who are very obviously basking in the joy of their granddaughter's undivided attention. Tammy explains the purpose of my presence to her parents, and we briefly exchange pleasantries as they explain they are rushed but will be back to pick up the children once Tammy's son arrives home from school. As they make their way towards the front entrance, I assume my seat at the kitchen table. The sound of voices at the door become numbed and muffled as I find my thoughts.

My work experience has afforded me various opportunities to sit among and hear the stories of abused women. In nearly every case these stories were fraught with the emotional turmoil experienced by these women, regardless of time and distance from the abusive situation. Tammy's story is cloaked in a quiet reflection that lacks the pain and resentment I am accustomed to hearing and seeing.

I feel pulled by a desire to believe that Tammy's seeming lack of noticeable emotional undertones is evidence of her healing and her desire to move beyond the trauma she experienced. This piece of Tammy's life will come to fit into a much larger picture of the process of personal development she seems to be evolving through and ultimately provides answers to the resilience she exudes.

As I go back to Tammy's experiences following the birth of her son and I realize, aside from the sense of undying spirit that arises as she speaks of surviving an abusive marriage, I have learned little about who she is beyond external descriptors of her life back then. It begins to seem as if, aside from her focus on maintaining the livelihood of herself and her son, Tammy does not exist. The picture of her that she paints, her essence, seems to lack as much focus and value as she admits to feeling back then.

"Who were you Tammy?" I ask myself. I realize that perhaps I do not know because there was a time that even Tammy was not sure who she was.

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After saying her good-byes and reacquainting her daughter with activities in the living room, Tammy joins me again. Her gentle sigh followed by a slight smile and laughter suggests she feels somewhat exhausted but not overwhelmed by the events of the past few minutes.

We reflect on our conversation before Tammy's parents arrived and Tammy determines that I have an adequate understanding of her experiences following the birth of her son. It is time to move on to the point in Tammy's life that she tells me is pivotal to her story. It is a period of time when Tammy begins to consciously reflect on her past in an effort to shape her future journey. Tammy's description of her daughter's existence allows me to paint myself a picture of how her daughter came to fit into her family portrait.

#### Motherhood: Tammy's Second Time Around

*He enters the office shortly after I do and takes a seat while I hand the receptionist my health card. She pulls up my file on her computer and smiles at me as she invites me to take a seat in the waiting area. "There isn't much of a wait right now," she said as if sensing I am in a rush. I pluck down beside him in one of several stereotypically black, fake leather chairs lining the waiting area and pickup an aged copy of a Chatelaine magazine I have read countless times before. He kisses me on the cheek and reaches for my hand. Not in the mood for kindly gestures, I pull it away from him and flip open the magazine to an article on breast feeding. 'It's an omen,' I think as I shut the magazine and slap it back down on the table. After nearly fifteen minutes of sitting together in complete silence, I am directed into the doctor's office with him at my heels. Five more minutes are spent in silence as we sit waiting for the doctor, he pretending to read the charts on the wall, me sitting and staring down at my feet as they perform figure eights. Finally, the doctor enters and upon hearing my request, I am whisked off to the bathroom, flashes of the scene in my parent's bathroom nearly eight years ago cursing through my mind. "Your results won't be long," I am told as I finish my duty and watch as the young nurse scuttles past, my urine sample in hand.*

*Rather than returning to the doctor's office, I make my way back to the waiting area and drop a quarter into the pay phone on the wall by the receptionist's desk. "It's me," I say when the voice on the other end picks up. "I just got done at the supermarket and am on my way to the restaurant. How are things?" The hauntingly familiar feeling of concern, that has found a regular home in the pit of my stomach, begins to dissipate. Perhaps this one will work out, I think to myself, knowing the odds are low that I will ever find reliable, consistent, and affordable childcare. However, my only alternative to working two minimum wage part-time jobs is welfare, and I am certainly not that desperate yet. I hang up the phone and make my way back into the bathroom where I peel off my supermarket uniform and grab the black pants and shirt that lay folded neatly in my shoulder bag. I should be hurrying, I think, as I check my watch again and realize I am already late for work. Yet, I want to be sure the doctor is back in his office before I arrive. I don't want to be stuck alone in that room with him again right now.*

*Much to my relief, the doctor is in when I arrive back at his office. No other alternatives available, I make the examining table my chair and before even settling in long enough to look up at the doctor, I hear myself saying, "I'm late for work. What are the results?" "Well," he says looking from me to my boyfriend and back at me, "the results of the pregnancy test have come back positive." I hear a sound I can't interpret escape from his mouth. There is a moment of silence and in that moment I realize I feel*

*nothing except a sensation of numbness. I wonder why I am not as devastated and frightened as I was the first time. Perhaps it is because I am older, going on 26 soon. Or perhaps years of working dead-end, non-single parent friendly, low wage jobs, struggling to meet role demands and not to mention surviving an abusive marriage, have left me unscathable. "I have a chart here we can go over to estimate your due date," the doctor offers. "No," I reply, "getting up from the table I sit on, "I have to get to work." Without another word I am up and out the office door, he once again following closely behind. I pause when I get to the glass doors to exit and he looks at me expectantly. "I'll talk to you later," I say and turn before his puckered lips have a chance to kiss my cheek. The phrase, "What am I going to do with my life?" choruses through my head repeatedly as I spend the next ten minutes riding a bus to work.*

Tammy told me on the day we met that her story truly begins with the birth of her second child, her daughter. I realize, as I review tapes and transcripts, that it is at this point Tammy begins to give a clearer understanding of who she is as a person. As her story unfolds, Tammy seems to focus more and more on herself, her feelings, her desires and beliefs, her internal struggles. The emotions behind her experience show themselves to me, not only in her words and phrases, but in the changing depth and tone of her voice, her increasingly animated facial expressions and body language. In retrospect, as I listen to our tapes, as I read through transcripts, I feel as if I am watching and hearing Tammy come alive.

As it was so with her first pregnancy, Tammy tells me her second pregnancy is also unplanned. Tammy explains to me, however, that her experience and perspective on motherhood changed the second time around. "I think I felt stronger after she was born because having had my son and raising him by myself, I knew I was strong enough."

#### Giving Birth: A New Life for Tammy

*I am 26-years-old. There is a familiarity amidst what seems like confusion and craziness. There was the same scuttle of nurses, voices, monitors surrounding me as I gave birth to my first child at the age of 18. "It's a girl," I hear a voice say. I am relieved, tired, and elated at the same time. I am anxious to hold my daughter for the first time. "A girl." I think, "a daughter." I think of my son, now nearly eight-years-old, and the immense joy and love he has brought into my life. Secretly though, I seemed to have dreamed my new daughter into reality -- pig-tails and dolls, talks about boys, periods, and love.*

*They place my daughter in my arms. I know her. I know her eyes. Something in her eyes is so incredibly familiar that within hours I feel as if we had been together for an eternity. She looks back at me and I have this sense of knowing she feels safe. It is like she knows she is where she was supposed to be; she "belongs" in my space. For so long now I have intentionally placed other people within that space in an effort to build a sense of security around myself and my son. The realization of the destruction that has been created by looking beyond myself for comfort and security is like an epiphany. Time, experience, and the birth of my daughter have shown me, it all begins with me.*

*I will begin again by saying good-bye to everything in my life that has not been placed there by me*

*for pure reasons, beginning with my daughter's father.*

*Suddenly, the long-standing confusion, anger, complexity are erased.*

*Life becomes clear. I know what I want. I know what I need. I know what I must do.*

It is clear to me as I sit face to face listening to Tammy's story that her daughter's birth signifies a pivotal turning point in her life. Although Tammy tells me the past is important in the lessons it taught her, some magical aspect of her daughter's birth provided her with the ability to recognize her challenges as life lessons. Tammy explains how her focus on raising and nurturing her children takes on deeper meaning following the birth of her daughter. Although meeting her children's basic needs is of obvious importance, she has come to realize the sacrifices that working outside the home entail. She is no longer willing to give up her time to anyone or anything that will take her away from her children. And so, after Tammy's daughter is born she makes the decision to apply for social assistance and spends the next two years of her life devoting her time to raising her children full-time and maintaining her family's livelihood by collecting welfare.

As Tammy explains this decision to me, I am sucked back inside myself. I wonder whether I will be able to sit with Tammy and hear her story without filtering it through my surprising bitterness that, for many years, has sat dormant. Because of the powerful emotions that tug at me as I sit with Tammy, I make a promise to myself to openly find a voice for my feelings, my experience at a later time.

#### The Pull of Personal Experience: Tammy's Story Touches My Feelings

My feelings of bitterness are as blatant today as they were back in Tammy's kitchen last December. I have no need to search the depths of my unconscious for the reasons why. Sitting beside my resentment is the embarrassing realization that one fleeting personal experience continues to sweep its brush across many others, even those experiences that do not belong to me. This is the stuff that misunderstandings, stereotypes are made of. I know that. Yet, perhaps, this short story also carries a meaningful message, one that, through the course of this research, I will be able to name and encourage others to put to purposeful and practical use.

I am 22-years-old. I am pregnant. I have attempted to force a picture inside my mind of my child, myself, and the father. Such attempts have met with greater anguish than the realization that I will become a mother much sooner than I had planned. The growing attachment to and dreams of the child growing inside me fill me with the realization that I can not choose to disconnect from this child through abortion or adoption. I know I will raise this child as a lone-parent. Yet, I have done the math, and I know that my meager paycheck will not sustain us through diapers, clothing, and baby food, much less meet my own basic needs.

I take my pay stub, along with a monthly calculation of the cost I will have in raising my baby to the local Social Services office. As I present my situation to the suit-clad man sitting behind an oak desk, I believe the word *DISDAIN* would appear with the magic of an invisible marker were I to lean over and rub

my hand across his face. I feel a deep red shame rise to my cheeks. "This is more than enough to live off of if you budget wisely," is his empty response. I rise to leave, feeling disheartened, defeated, and much less human than when I arrived. There is a ribbon of anger holding together the parcel of me that is bursting full of sadness, fear, and self-contempt. A fleeting thought crosses my mind as I leave his office that day: "I wonder if my face will appear when he slices into the expensive rib-eye steak he will eat for supper tonight."

I finish writing my short story feeling a sense of healing in having put this experience to paper. I read it again and my thoughts fork in two directions. Is my description of this personal experience truly relevant here and now? Yes, I argue to myself, it is. It serves to reflect and amplify both Tammy's and my experiences of struggling with a dissonance between our needs and the resources available to help us attain these necessities. As I will come to understand when Tammy speaks of her own humiliating experiences in dealing with the 'system, it affirms my own feelings. I assume others, aside from the two of us, have faced similar dehumanizing experiences. So, yes, this is relevant.

Each time I reflect on this portion of my interview with Tammy, this personal recollection rears its head and stirs my emotions. Knowing my personal experience filters through Tammy's story, I also find myself asking whether I am able to gain enough distance from this experience to let Tammy's story, not mine, guide the next portion of this narrative. I feel I am better able to do so having now voiced my own experience.

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Despite determining this new focus and direction and ensuring a means to see it through, Tammy's challenges are far from over. Tammy tells me that the next two years signify a very dark period in her life. Unlike her disclosure of abuse, Tammy's down trodden eyes and her choppy, whispered voice not only tell me, but show me, her pain. In Tammy's own words, her experience of living on social assistance is "degrading, it's insulting, it's humiliating, it's depressing." Yet, in retrospect, for Tammy, it has also become necessary.

### Tammy's Struggles

*"Just a minute, just a sec," I say, mostly to myself as my daughter, nearly one-year-old, whimpers at me to peel her from under the car seat straps and snowsuit that confine her. "Okay, um, pay the cab," I say attempting to focus on one of many tasks at hand. Despite my slim budget I have cut into my monthly miscellaneous fund of \$20 to pay for the cab that has driven us home from the grocery store. My fingers are crossed that this month will be extraordinary, with no need for a new round of Tylenol, toothpaste, or shampoo. Normally, I make the trek to the grocery store several times a week, pulling my daughter and groceries home in a sleigh. Today, my list long and legs are tired from making my weekly trip to the laundry mat by sleigh, I spring for a cab to take us to the grocery store and back. "One minute," I say to baby sticking her soother in her mouth as I run out to pay the taxi driver.*

*I enter the house moments later to a now screaming baby. As I scramble to release her from her*

*car seat the phone rings. I grab the handle of the car seat and carry her towards the phone, receiver in one hand, other hand grasping at buckles. "Hello," leaks from my throat like a brief, exhausted choke.*

*"Hello Tammy," the voice says with a well-earned familiarity. "It's Charlotte from the school again." That last word, again, vibrates through my head like a hammer striking metal pipes. "There's been an incident at school today with your son, and Principal Smith has requested that you come to the school to pick him up." I am silent for several seconds as I struggle to find my voice over the large lump that has planted itself in my throat. Like a miracle the lump loosens and I shock myself as its energy comes spewing from my mouth and into the receiver. "Ms. Enns," I reply, perhaps too forcefully, "it was my understanding this issue had been put to rest. My son has Asperger's Syndrome, which is attributable to many of his challenging behaviors. However, he has a right to his education and you have staff on hand whose specific purpose it is to create a plan to teach my son appropriate behaviors within the school environment. I do not see how sending him home serves as a natural consequence for his behaviors at school. In fact, I am sure it is reinforcing many of the behaviors you wish to see stopped." Charlotte's recourse is to transfer me through to Principal Smith who recounts their "no tolerance" policy to me for the hundredth time. I hang up the phone and fight back tears as I dial the taxi cab once again. All I can wonder on my way to pick up my son is what funds I will now cut into to make room for this unforeseen taxi cab expense.*

*Journal entry: January 20, 1999*

*Simply breathing right now is an effort. Like everything is closing in on me and squeezing tighter and tighter. Sometimes I wonder if there is a world outside these drab apartment walls. If there is, when will I get to see it and experience it again? It feels like the only thing that is keeping me going right now is my children.*

*My god, I can't even remember how to have a conversation with another adult any more. I ran into an old friend at the grocery store today and I was pretty much lost after "hello." How do I respond when people ask me what I'm doing now? Obviously, I'm busy doing the most important thing in the world, being a mother, but somehow the respect seeps from their eyes when they learn that I'm a mother on welfare.*

*My final outing of the day was even more uplifting. The school called again telling me to pick up my son. I didn't even bother to ask what he'd done this time. And, for once, much to their relief I'm sure, I saved my breath trying to put the whole Asperger's thing into perspective. I could talk symptomology and treatment until I'm blue in the face and still get the "teach your kid some self-control" look.*

*I don't even have the energy to cry right now. What a relief it would be to be able to curl up in a tight little ball and just let it all out, all the pain, all the anger and frustration, the emptiness, the loneliness, everything. The blackness feels so all-consuming. There is no end in sight.*

*Until Tomorrow,*

Tammy

*I put down my pen feeling so wasted from the day's events that I cannot write anymore. Besides, what more is there to say? I long for the day when hopeful, happy themes will fill the pages of my daily journal. Then it strikes me that just this longing signifies the undying strength deep inside of me. And no, there is not utter darkness in my world. Something inside my soul is stirring, reminding me of why I am here. So, I rise from my spot on my stained and worn out living room carpet, gently set my journal back on its home on my tattered bookshelf and tiptoe into the bedroom that my children share. I stand in the doorway for a brief moment and bask in my vision, lit up only by the faint light crawling forth from the kitchen. They are both snoring gently -- my son characteristically curled up on his right side, hands both tucked prayer style under his cheek; baby is nestled, face to the side, her body curled up into a little ball with her legs tucked tightly beneath her tummy.*

*I go first to my son's side and stroke his hair, succumbed by indescribable feelings of love and protectiveness. I lean in and kiss his cheek. "I love you," I whisper before letting my eyes leave the face I love so much. Next I turn to my baby sleeping soundly in her crib. I pull the blanket up to cover her tiny figure cloaked in a soft terry-towel sleeper. The tears that would not come out to meet my pain, finally find themselves in this moment of pure and immeasurable love. And for the first time that I can remember today, I smile. There is light amidst the darkness.*

*Now, it is my turn to sleep.*

Tammy relates a story of emotional and financial struggle fraught deeply with social isolation during her two years on social assistance. She explains the loss of dignity she felt living within the welfare system. "I hated going into that office. They look down their noses at you, like you're less than, lower class."

It is difficult for me to conjure up a picture of Tammy within the imprisoned existence that she once lived. It is a period of life that seems foreign to the physical world where she now appears nestled in contentment. I express my own sense of comfort in the bright and open home that surrounds me, and Tammy's response makes it clear how important her surroundings are to her overall sense of well-being. "I absolutely love where we live now, and if it wasn't for the housing authority we wouldn't have a yard, a fenced yard. I think it's wonderful that the housing authority exists because we're living in a duplex and we feel like part of a community. The kids can play and get to know people. I love doing my own yard work and I love feeling like this is my place."

This sense of home and belonging are a far cry from the isolated and belittling existence that Tammy experienced during her years on welfare. She explains how her loss of connectedness and sense of self-worth compounded the stress associated with her son's Asperger's Syndrome. She tells me, however, that as difficult as things got, there was a sense of faith and a hope for a better future: "that was my two years of personal growth and questioning myself and my life and asking where am I headed? Why am I here? How did I get here? How can I learn from that? ... It was like growing pains."



I am so entranced by Tammy's story, my own physical sense of self has been laid to rest beside the pen lying motionless on top of the kitchen table. For a while, I am not sure how long; it seems my infrequent mutterings do not extend far beyond a simple "ya" or "right" and at times a "wow." After a while, Tammy's purposeful pauses extend in length to assume a quiet, expectant silence. At that point, I re-enter myself and our conversation. Feeling like I have just come out of a state of deep meditation, I am energized and full of a desire to understand how these forces eventually propelled Tammy's current life direction.

It seems clear to me, over the course of learning her story, that something inside Tammy, something untouchable and indescribable lies at the root of Tammy's understanding of her experience. Although some human beings become bitter, outwardly focused, and immobile in the face of challenge, others, like Tammy, seem to initiate self-reflection and life changes, understanding struggle as essential to personal growth. Ultimately, her quest for meaning has led Tammy down many different paths throughout the story that she offers to me. My current concern becomes understanding what forces Tammy understands as essential in determining her decision to go to university.

#### Clinging to Hope: Tammy's Struggle to Survive in the Face of Adversity

*As I enter the familiarity of Carla's office, I literally feel two weeks worth of tension begin to drain from my body. We chat light-heartedly as we sit down face, to face on the long black leather couch. Without conscious awareness I pick up a small glazed stone that sits in the tiny wooden sandbox on the table beside, what two years worth of therapy, have deemed my spot on the couch. Pebble in hand, I begin to trace obscure patterns in the sand as our counseling session begins.*

*Today, I do most of the talking. Carla sits in gentle and attentive silence as I retrace the events of the past two weeks. A theme emerges as I reiterate the many stresses I have encountered in dealing with issues related to my son's Asperger's condition. Finally, I pause, at which time Carla offers a simple acknowledgment that changes the focus of our session. "When I listen to you I learn so much about Asperger Syndrome and the issues it brings forth in the lives of those affected by it. There is power in your knowledge and experience, Tammy. I wonder how it is that you understand this wisdom influencing your life?" This question becomes the focus of our next several sessions. It begins to take on a life of its own, outside the four walls of Carla's office. Over time, I find myself focusing, not on the stress this situation brings, but on how I can utilize this experience to gain a sense of personal power. In the weeks that follow I am haunted by an old, and seemingly obsolete dream to attend to university. I fight against an urge to envision the power I could effect on my son's life in having formal credentials beside my name. I fight against this urge, knowing it is a dream I cannot realize. Not because I do not have the intellect and ability to do so successfully, but because I have neither the time nor the money to pursue a university education.*

A long-standing vision of going to university, years of therapy, and the practical and theoretical knowledge Tammy gained in living with her son's Asperger's Syndrome all built upon a foundation

consisting of Tammy's confidence in her intellectual and practical abilities to attend university. Although the desire and confidence to pursue a university degree lived somewhere deep inside Tammy, she explains to me that what didn't exist were the practical means to pursue this goal. However, the challenges handed Tammy during this point in her life came to offer her more than just the gift of insight. They also brought to her life an individual, whose own knowledge would prompt what Tammy terms a "deciding moment" in the direction of her life.

#### Out of the Darkness: The Final Push towards Change

*"One rounded tablespoon of No-Name brand coffee grounds added to yesterday's used grinds makes four cups of coffee." As bizarre as it sounds, I say this line inside my head each morning when I make my coffee. I find it intriguingly strange how we humans make rituals out of monotonous, everyday tasks. I learned this little coffee saving tip after splurging \$15 on the "Tightwad Gazette." Money well spent.*

*This morning, however, I fight what I figure must be anxiety as I measure six rounded tablespoons of no-name coffee into the basket. I am definitely going all out for the occasion as I break with my daily ritual of rationing coffee. I have replaced the Comet with Mr. Clean, which I save for those rare special occasions when I want that lemon fresh scent to hang in the air. By the time I am done every inch of my home reeks lemons. I feel somewhat ridiculous making a social event out of a parent-aide visit, but the thought of having another woman into my home for the majority of the morning makes me feel elated and well, almost normal. She has been contracted out by Social Services to provide me with guidance on dealing with my son's behaviors in the home. Obviously, for me, her visit means much more than the behavioral modification tactics she will present me with.*

*I am relieved that baby is napping when she arrives. She enters my home like a long lost friend, obliging my offer of coffee and making idle chit-chat. Throughout the course of the next two hours, we sit together and create a daily routine along with a chart and system for rewarding positive behaviors that my son displays. She turns and hugs me before she leaves. I feel a sense of loneliness as I watch her walk away. But, I also feel a renewed sense of liveliness and hope. Over the course of the next week I find myself checking the calendar regularly counting the days until she will return.*

*Over the course of the next three months, she comes into my home on a weekly basis and our relationship becomes closer and more personal with each visit. It is her final visit that stands out in my mind the most. Partly because I am saddened with the knowledge that her contract in my home is ending. Mostly because it is during this final visit that my life was changed forever.*

*As we sit speaking over another full pot of coffee, she talks to me about her own children. She has basked in the glory of her grandchildren on several occasions and empathized with my challenges as she shares the many trials of her oldest daughter, also a single mother. Unlike me, however, her daughter is a university graduate. She tells me her daughter has recently moved herself and her children into a condominium in the city, and she has just put a down-payment on a new car. She gives my hand a gentle*

*pat seeming to sense my feelings of longing and hopelessness for my own situation. "I'd love to go to university. I dream about what it could be like," I say. "I just don't understand how anyone can do it. How would I ever have time to be a devoted mother and take five classes? It just doesn't seem realistic to me right now."*

*It is through the course of this final conversation with this parent-aide that I learn some very practical information that will determine the course of my life over the next several years. She clears up my misconceptions about not being eligible for student loan funding and how many classes constitute a full load. It is fewer than I had previously understood, and I am filled with a new confidence about my ability to get into university and life in general. This conversation takes place on a Wednesday. By Friday morning, I am officially a university applicant.*

Tammy radiates a strong sense of serendipity that leaves my insides feeling as warm as my cheeks that have been basking in the gentle heat of the sun shining through Tammy's kitchen window. As she relates her introduction to life as a university student, I know I am sitting in the presence of someone whose sense of serenity and enlightenment in her direction is true and authentic. "I believe there's a right time for everything," Tammy tells me, "and I had to trust that this was the right time for me to go to university... everything just fell into place. Nothing was forced... you have to learn in life when to tune into that, when to listen, when to know."

Finally, Tammy can place greater meaning on the dissonance she once felt in knowing she had the ability, but not the means, to pursue a university education.

Had I gone earlier, before having children, I think it would look completely different... I don't think I would have done as well... If I was 18 and going to university, I think I would have just picked something and gone through with the four years... maybe I would have dropped out after the first year... Ultimately, success for me now is about getting a degree and working at a career that I love and not being so worried about the money.

The philosophical nature of Tammy's journey into university changes tone dramatically as our conversation takes on a more concrete and practical tone. Although I am keenly enthralled by Tammy's insight, the light-hearted interlude that emerges is a welcome break from the intensity of our conversation. It allows me time not only to consciously ground myself, but also to create a concrete picture of Tammy's current everyday existence.

"Can you describe a typical day in your life as a university student?" I ask Tammy. Tammy's eyebrows climb up her forehead as she scrunches her nose and lets out an abrupt noise that lands somewhere between a sigh and a giggle. "Chaos," she says, before delving into the finer details.

#### A Day in Tammy's Life

*It's been half an hour since my first attempt to wake my son up for school. Words, that climb several decibels with each attempt to get him out of bed, a room filled with sunlight, and a squealing sister*

*who crawls on top of him fail to do the trick. Finally, I pull off his covers and physically maneuver his feet over the edge of the bed and onto the floor. "I have to get to school, get up and eat breakfast," I say as I throw a pair of jeans and t-shirt onto the bed beside him. He moans but rises, leaving me satisfied that this frustrating task of waking him has finally been accomplished.*

*Next, I pick up his sister who continues to blissfully jump on his disheveled bed. "Breakfast for you," I say smoothing the cowlick in her bangs with my fingers as I walk down the stairs with her on my hip. We enter the kitchen and I feel my heart pick up as I glance at the clock and begin to feel characteristically short of time. I plop her down on a kitchen chair and smear peanut butter and jelly onto a now cold piece of toast. Once her breakfast is in front of her, I dash back up the stairs, throw my school books into the backpack on my bedroom floor, and consider whether I will have time to do anything more with myself than wash my face and brush my hair. No, I figure thinking of the exam I will write this afternoon. I grab my backpack and dig to find my psychology text amidst an array of heavy, hard cover books. For the next half an hour, until I leave for school, I will carry my text around the house with me glancing at highlighted fragments in chapters six through 10.*

*It is not yet 8:00 in the morning and I already feel exhausted as I leave my house to begin the day. My daughter and I head for the bus stop as I leave my son sitting on the front porch of the house. If on time, the cab that will drive him to school will arrive in approximately ten minutes. His baby sister chirps loudly and blows him kisses as I encourage her to hurry and run beside me to the bus stop at the corner of our block.*

*We arrive at the daycare center 30 minutes later. In characteristic fashion, her tiny little hand breaks free from my own and she races ahead of me towards the door. I hear her squeals of "Carla bear" trailing off as I lose track of her amidst an ocean of souls no larger than she is. I wave to a childcare worker and point to my watch signaling that I am running late. The childcare worker waves back and motions that she has tracked and accounted for my daughter. I do not have time to mourn the good-bye kiss that I missed this morning, realizing class will begin in less than 10 minutes.*

*There are still several students mulling outside the lecture theatre when I pull up outside the doors, breathless from my hurried pace. I walk into the theatre and instantly spot the familiar jacket and head of hair belonging to my friend Veronica. She has saved me the seat beside her and we have time only for a few casual pleasantries before the professor appears before us and begins his 50 minute lecture. After a class worth of note-taking amidst thoughts of the exam I will write this afternoon, we are dismissed and Veronica and I break into chatter as we gather our belongings and head to our next class.*

*"Lunch today?" Veronica poses. "Love to, but can't," I answer. "Have an exam this afternoon and had a heck of a time getting the kids to sleep last night. Don't feel like I got enough studying in so I'm going to hold-up in the library and read over the noon hour. Besides I'm pretty broke right now. How 'bout we brown bag it together tomorrow?"*

*Veronica, several years my senior and married to a very prominent business man, slouches off my suggestion by offering to treat to me lunch tomorrow. Knowing I am full of pride she adds, "It'll be my treat*

*in celebration of the exam I know you are going to ace," she offers. As we break from each other to go to separate classes, she gives me a quick wink. "I will never figure out how you keep it all together and do it with such grace." Just as I think I have lost Veronica in the cloud of bustling students, her head emerges bobbing up and down amidst the sea of bodies, "I'll drop you off after class," she shouts. I give her a wave and turn away smiling. My heart feels warm.*

*Before I know it, two o'clock has arrived and the exam that had held my attention all morning has been put easily behind me. Now, I can focus on the two papers I have due next week with a clear mind. Knowing my time is limited, I am grateful knowing I will not waste precious time on the bus ride home. Veronica and I meet up in the hallway outside our classes and she spends the next 20 minutes between school and my home, chirping merrily about her children, now university students themselves.*

*When I arrive home I am ravished, hardly having had time to notice I forgot to pack myself a lunch today. With last night's leftovers plopped on one side of me and papers and a pen on the other side, I spend the next hour and a half working on an essay based on contemporary art. The familiar sound of my son plummeting through the front door is my cue to set my work aside. "Keep your shoes on," I holler as I get up from the kitchen table and push my books into on large heaping mound. "We've gotta go pick up your sister." "Ah mom, can't I stay home?" he responds, knowing full well the familiar phrase that is about to escape my lips. I enter the living room, peck him on the cheek, "Of course not honey, I want you to come with me so I can hear all about your day." I know he is not really disappointed at the prospect of coming with me. This little ritual has become our own special time together. "All right," he sighs. I cringe as I close the door behind us, realizing it will be close to 5:30 p.m. by the time we get home and I haven't even thought about what to make for supper.*

This piece of Tammy's story is significant for me because it seems to exemplify the enormous feat of being a lone-mother and full-time student. I am not sure why we were compelled to laughter as we sat together, except perhaps that we shared a feeling of camaraderie in knowing how absolutely insane Tammy's verbal description of her day would sound. In my mind's eye, I have a picture of Tammy, much like myself, like other lone-mothers I have met through the years, living life in fast-forward mode. What truly amazes me is the energy that Tammy eludes, despite her hectic pace. It is an energy that was not evident in her voice, in her story, when she spoke of her years spent at home full-time on social assistance. My intrigue finds me reading the interview transcripts in search of clues that will shed light on what propels this vigorous energy. I am drawn to a phrase Tammy spoke that I think may hold relevance. "I have goals," Tammy explained to me during our first meeting together, "and goals are so important in life. Without goals it is hard to feel good about yourself."

Having a shared understanding of the insane pace of life that is part and parcel of the life of a lone-mother and full-time university student, the interview takes on an 'over coffee' conversational air. In the space of one day, Tammy accomplishes what only seems possible in two. In fact, after her children are tucked in, it is as if Tammy's day is just beginning. "Once the children are in bed, I start studying again,

writing and reading... My day is completely filled. I fall into bed exhausted everyday."

In a very natural manner, our conversation flows to encompass the challenges that Tammy faces, given her many roles. "What is the most challenging aspect of your life as a student?" I ask. Tammy's daughter once again enters the kitchen, requesting more cookies and a drink, . "Finding a balance," she states without hesitation.

Tammy seems to have multi-tasking down to a craft as she attends to her daughter's needs without so much as a lull in conversation. "If I'm spending too much time studying. I feel guilty that I'm not spending enough time with my children. If I'm spending too much time with my children, then I feel guilty I'm not spending enough time studying." Tammy pats her daughter on the head and she scurries off as Tammy finds her place at her kitchen table. "I don't have enough time for me. I don't make enough time for me... That's probably the biggest challenge... I just wish there were more hours in the day."

Aware and able to name the challenge to create balance in her life, Tammy goes on to describe her conscious effort at working through this challenge. Feeling as if I have gained an understanding of Tammy's resilient nature, I am left feeling unsurprised by her efforts. In fact, I would expect nothing less from her at this point. Tammy tells me that, although she has little contact with her daughter's father, she has maintained contact with her daughter's grandparents who take her for a couple of hours each Saturday. This provides Tammy with a few hours each weekend to complete tasks that she has not gotten to during the week. Tammy also works on creating a sense of pleasure in her life and freedom to develop other personal pursuits.

"I save Friday nights for me," she shares. "That's my sanity time. I go out with friends... I think it's also gotten easier in the second year than in the first year because I was so concerned. I'd been out of school for such a long time that I was worried I wasn't going to do very well. So, I put quite a bit of time and energy into my school work. I didn't neglect my children, but I didn't spend as much time with them as I try to now... I don't feel as guilty this year when I say, "Okay, this paper can wait. We're going to a play or to the museum... or just have fun. I don't feel the guilt this year that I did last year."

Despite her acknowledgment of the importance of balance, I have a growing awareness, that despite the support surrounding Tammy, she harbors a sense of pride and determination to "fend for herself" so to speak. She acknowledges that there are far more offers for support given to her by friends and family than there are offers taken. Recalling a similar mindset and having become much more willing to accept such offers, I take several opportunities to, in a spirit of camaraderie, poke fun at what I present to Tammy as "your damn stubbornness."

Money is another area where Tammy continues to keep her struggles private. The financial challenges she faces as a lone mother are exemplified when our discussion turns to her current mode of transportation. "The car I have is 11 years old, but that's new for me. I had to get a newer car because the one I was driving before was a 1980. I was pulled over in it by the police when they were doing spring inspections and they pulled it off the road. They said it was unsafe to drive."

Over the course of getting to know Tammy, the subject of student loans takes on a different tone.

As she accumulates more debt, this area creates growing concern for Tammy. "I'm starting to worry more about them now... I keep living off loans and going further into debt... but I refuse to go back on welfare. I won't ever go through that humiliation again." It seems, once again, the commonalities between Tammy's experience and my own surface. Although personal accomplishment and fulfillment in the form of gaining a post-secondary education bear a huge financial price for now, this cost outweighs the dehumanizing effects of surviving at a bare minimum.

Our conversation turns to focus on Tammy's family as I ask her whether they help her out financially. "I don't ask them to, but they want to, so they'll do things for me in a roundabout way so that I can't say 'no.' Like my dad came last night and sharpened my lawn mower blade because I had mentioned to my son that I should get it done this year but that it cost too much; \$15 at the hardware store. He told my dad without me even realizing it. So, my dad came in and did it last night."

But the greatest clue to Tammy's sense of support from her family is shown to me when I ask her what her parents might say were they a part of our conversations. Despite Tammy's gentle and soft-spoken nature, I am taken aback by the redness that begins to rim her eyes. Stories of depression, abuse, and years of struggle have yet to shake Tammy's composed demeanor. The dewy shadows of tears themselves signify the important meaning that Tammy's parents hold in her life.

"A couple of times in the past year my mom has looked at me and said, 'You're such a great mom.' I keep thinking, 'no, I'm not.' I make so many mistakes. Then again, we all do. It's nice to hear that."

I reflect on these few moments and the contradictions that play out in my mind. Contradictions of a woman who gives countless examples of her determination and love for her children, yet who lends me this quick and subtle clue that questions still linger in her mind. But I don't confront this and determine that I never will. I know this game of Jekyll and Hyde myself, and I chalk it up to human experience as well as the messages that we as women often receive. It is okay to be human, to be uncertain at times. I allow Tammy this. The other part, the piece of responsibility that I place on society's plate, will be left for now, only to be explored later in this paper.

As much as time and financial constraints and academic commitments in her role as a full-time student add to Tammy's challenges, aspects of her experience, including support from her family, lend her strength. Her experience at university also provides Tammy with one of her strongest sources of support and personal well-being.

#### Social Support: The Importance of Others in Tammy's Life

*The stress of final exams dissipates as I bask in the sweet aromas and colours that spring introduces to my senses. As I make my way slowly from one campus building to another, my thoughts drift lazily back to a time when I felt imprisoned by the bleak walls of the dreary box I once called home. I am overwhelmed by an encompassing sense of gratefulness for the freedom and serenity I am experiencing right here, right now. Life is happening all around me. It seems amazing to me, as other students buzz busily from class to class, that I am in the presence of countless others who harbor dreams and future plans*

*of their own. Life is so full.*

*I am pulled from my realm of enlightenment by a familiar voice shouting "Tammy." I turn to see Cheryl and Amanda heading towards me, both turning in unison to admire the flock of men who emerge out of nowhere, touting nothing but shorts to cover their otherwise bare bodies. I am hit from afar by their youthful energy and it fills my face with a toothy grin. Premonitions of the conversation to come make me giggle before any words are shared between us.*

*"I need you," Cheryl chimes with perkiness. "I am sooo lost in biology, only you can save me now." I respond with a playful roll of my eyes. Cheryl laughs and shakes her head in a playful gesture. "I feel another tutoring session coming on," I say, slipping my arm through Cheryl's and steering her towards the Fine Arts building. "I've got drama right now. What are you doing in an hour?" Without responding directly to my question, she nearly knocks me off my feet with a bear hug. "You are totally and completely the most wonderful person in the world!" she squeals. "Amy, tell me is this not the greatest woman you have ever met?"*

*Somewhat less animated than Cheryl, Amanda provides me with a gently genuine smile. "I don't know any other single moms going to school full time who pull off the top marks in all of their classes." Modesty, usually overshadowed by my firm sense of self confidence, comes out of hiding and shows itself on my brightly colored sheets. "I guess that's what happens when studying becomes one's primary form of adult recreation," I retort. "Speaking of which," Amanda cuts in quickly, "let's all make plans for a girls' night this Friday,, 'kay?" "Good idea," Cheryl and I chime in unison. "I'll see if mom and dad can sit for me, but I gotta run right now. Meet you at the tables down by the statue after class?" Both girls nod in agreement and wave at me as I head for my next class.*

Tammy's passion and energy for university life seem to seep through every pore in her body as she focuses on the sense of fullness her experience brings. I struggle to remain focused on the task at hand because, in my mind's eye, my own face finds its way into the story that she is describing. I breathe in an envious longing to, once again, relive my own undergraduate experience.

Words like "outside validation," "freedom," "friends," "goals," and "empowerment" become the foundation of her vocabulary as we turn our focus from challenges to high points in her university experience. The stress of time constraints, balance, and everyday challenges such as finding evening childcare, while very real, weigh less heavily on Tammy as they are countered by an increasingly powerful sense of personal fulfillment on a variety of levels.

"Just getting to walk around campus for me is fun. You know, leaving my four walls here and having space to move about freely. Seeing and talking with people about their dreams and plans, that's important too.... I'd almost forgotten how to talk to people." Tammy's words prompt my own silent giggle as I recall the many times I caught myself talking baby talk within the context of an adult conversation. "You know, you bump into people at the grocery store, but it's not the same thing. So, having a social network again is definitely a high point. And I'm doing things for myself again. You know, this is for me."



Except that, Tammy tells me with a face and voice that are full of gentle pride, what is important for her ultimately also benefits her children. "My son's proud of me when I bring home a paper with a good mark. He says, you know, 'way to go, mom.' So, I guess it's given him the courage, too, to try hard in school."

Tammy explains to me that, aside from childcare, her daycare provider has offered support in terms of professional resources to aid in her daughter's personal development. "My daughter has a tendency to be shy. [The daycare] has a woman on staff that acts as a consultant in terms of childhood development. She meets with several of the children, including my daughter to help them with their social skills. She has really blossomed."

"I've seen only good things coming from him, both my children. Like my daughter going to daycare. I was a little scared of that, but she loves going there now, and she has a lot of friends there that she wouldn't have made if I hadn't gone back to school."

Tammy also tells other stories of practical support that she has been offered that has benefited her tremendously. "I got called into school unexpectedly this week so I called my daughter's daycare the night before and they said 'for sure she can come in.' They've been a wonderful support to me."

Tammy's voice, her face, her whole being seem impassioned as she summarizes how the benefits of her happiness reach into the soul of her life, and her children. "I want to be the best mom I can be for them. By my children seeing me empower myself, it gives them hope... they can see by my choices how I have taken my life into my own hands, and I don't depend on anyone else to motivate me or to do that for me."

Despite little change in the deliciously sweet tone of voice that greeted me on that first visit, frequent trips in and out of the kitchen leave me sensing that Tammy's daughter has begun to grow bored of the living room. I am amazed by the patience this four-year-old has displayed. Another strength her mother has passed on to her, I think to myself. The final question I ask Tammy seems appropriate for the break in intensity our little visitor has afforded us. "If you," I ask, "were to meet a young mom thinking of going to university, what would you want her to know?"

#### Tammy's Message to Other Lone-Mothers

*I am in the middle of preparing my children's favorite cuisine for supper, hot dogs, when the phone rings. "Mom, it's for you," my son yells despite the fact I am standing merely three feet from him. I cringe, sensing the pain that is most likely coursing through my caller's ear right now. "Inside voice," I chant unable to break free from the child friendly language that I continue to use despite his having been alive for 12 years now. "Hello," I say almost too quietly as I throw him a "you see how it's done" look. "Hi, Tammy," the voice responds. I hear a faint glimmer of amusement in her voice. "This is Jaime from the woman's center on campus." Despite having only met her on one or two occasions in passing, I immediately call her to mind. She continues, "As you know, your name has been on our emergency contact service in the case there is an emergency with one of your children." "Oh sure," I say knowingly. "It's sure*

a great service to have access to." "For sure," she responds. "Actually, I'm calling for another reason. You see, we have begun a mentoring program called 'mom to mom.' It's a program for women who become mothers during their adolescent years and who are now considering taking university classes." "What a great idea," I offer with enthusiasm. "I was a teen mom, too." "Ya," she responds, "that's what your records here show and so we thought, given your experience, you'd make an excellent mentor to one of the young mothers on our waiting list." Before I can answer she continues, "I realize how crazy your life must be already, but you would not have to commit a huge chunk of time and it would only entail meeting with her once to kind of explain the ropes." "I'd love to," I reply without a second thought as I cradle the phone on my shoulder while serving my children their meals. We set up a time and place next Monday when I will be introduced to my mentee Nicole.

The day arrives, and as I rush to meet Nicole for the first time, I wonder what possessed me to choose Monday, of all days, for this meeting. Out of breath when I reach Nicole, who is waiting with Jaime from the woman's center, I apologize profusely for my frazzled display of tardiness.

"It's not nearly as painful as it may appear to be right now," I pant and we share a comfortable round of laughter. Nicole is a vibrant and friendly girl of 18 years and after Jaime departs several minutes later, she wastes no time confronting me with a barrage of questions.

"University is something I really have my heart set on, but I'm really worried about everything. How do you do it?" she asks me intently. "What's your biggest fear?" I ask her. "Oh boy, there's so many. Mostly I guess how I will have time to be a mom and a student at the same time."

"I'll be honest, Nicole, it's a challenge and it's a fear I had before I started, too." As I continue we stop walking and settle down on a shady piece of fluffy green grass. "It was a misconception, though. I thought there was no way I'd have enough time, but I proved myself wrong. I was also under the misconception I had to take five or six classes per term, but I found out I didn't. I only had to take three to be considered full-time." She pursues this with, "you can get a student loan with three classes?" "Ya," I answer matter-of-factly. "The student loans is, you know, enough to live on. I had fears about that too, not having enough money. It's not great, but it's, you know, enough to live on." She ponders this quietly for a moment. "I have a daughter that's almost two now. What about childcare?" "There's a daycare on campus that caters to undergrad students. The childcare I have is amazing. That's probably the key right there, not having to worry if she's okay. That's been a huge help for me." "Ya," she answers, "my mom takes care of my daughter right now. It's hard to imagine being away from her for so long each day and it's scary to think I'd be leaving her with people neither of us knows. Don't you ever feel overwhelmed with everything, though?"

"For sure, who doesn't, but there are supports in place when I'm feeling overwhelmed. You can't help but make friends when you go to school. You know, there's so many different people. You're pretty much guaranteed to click with someone. I get a lot of emotional support from the friends I've met at school and they're all so affirming. Not a lot of my friends are single parents, but they're always saying to me 'you do everything I do but with two children also. You really are amazing! It's a great feeling.'"

*"Wow, two children," Nicole says, shaking her head in disbelief. "And you get all your school work done on time?"*

*I chuckle, "Well, I haven't handed anything in late so far, but trust me there are times when I'm chomping at the bit wondering, you know, am I going to get this paper done? So far I've met these challenges." I pause for a moment, thoughtfully. "You know, that's something I should look into. I'm not sure if the profs are a little more lenient to single parents. You know, like if a paper's due Monday and your kids get sick or something. Knowing I could get an extension if some kind of parenting emergency came up would definitely be helpful."*

*"It sounds like pretty stressful," she says her voice trailing off. "Actually, the greatest part about university, Nicole, is that it's not all work." The tension that was building up in Nicole's body seems to release itself. "It's fun also. There are lots of social opportunities here; you just have to make time in your life for you. For a long time, I lived a very isolated life. University has made me feel like I'm part of the world again."*

*"You make it sound so easy. What has been the hardest part for you?" Nicole inquires. "There are challenges, you know. Time is helping me work through them. School work gets easier with time, and it gets easier to find balance. Finding an evening baby-sitter is a struggle at times. If you have friends or family near by, that's a definite bonus. But honestly," I say, "the hardest part was getting through the fear of not knowing. For me, going to university took the fear out of thinking of going. The first and most difficult step for me was in actually applying. It just got easier after that."*

*Nicole has a distantly dreamy look in her eyes. I sit with her in silence for the next several moments basking in the energy of the activity around us. "Would you show me where I can go to pick up an application?" she asks. I smile at her as I stand up and offer her my hand, "Come on, let's go."*

In the isolation that surrounded Tammy as a lone mother on welfare, Tammy explains that her dream to attend university remained distant. She explains that the everyday commitments of parenting, along with significant stress, low-self esteem, and financial and transportation constraints simply left her little time, energy, or means of purposefully seeking information about attending post-secondary education. Having such information given to her in a concrete and organized manner, rather than having to seek it for herself, would have made this endeavor much easier for Tammy. Further, having practical support in going through the process of filling out university and student loan applications, along with applying for childcare, would have taken some of the fear and intimidation out of the process itself. Tammy also acknowledges her fear of failure, suggesting that emotional support and encouragement from the outside, including support from other women who have worked through similar issues, would benefit future perspective students.

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The relationship Tammy and I developed as a result of this research spans well over a year. There were months, during this period of time, when Tammy and I did not communicate at all. Lost in my own

world of full-time work, motherhood, researching, and struggling to balance the pieces of me that lie beyond these three domains, I reconnected with Tammy to fill in gaps in a life that felt distant but, at the same time, very close and connected to my own. Despite our lack of consistent physical contact and having met only as a result of this research endeavor, when we meet face-to-face, there is an easiness between us that I have felt before upon reconnecting with old friends that I have not seen in years. The shame I sometimes fought in dropping in and out of Tammy's life at the drop of a hat was forgotten as we shared, time and again, the understanding that this is simply the nature of our busy lives.

It is through these shared understandings that I have come to understand the complexity of her life. It is through learning about Tammy and myself that I can truly know the personal development that she has experienced as a mother and a student. It is also through knowing Tammy and myself that pieces of our lives that once dominated our lifestyles change with our perspectives.

Tammy's experience has brought her to a place in her life where personal fulfillment and understanding are at a peak. Yet, obviously, her life is not without struggle, and it is not without void either. Although portions of Tammy's life and being have risen to the forefront and she has experienced a sense of empowerment and learned the meaning of happiness, she has also become more aware of the personal work she still needs to do. Essentially, the more Tammy finds herself, the more she recognizes the pieces that are missing. Life can feel very lonely when the characters we play are limited to certain roles.

"In February of this year, during winter break, my mom took my kids for a week. I spent the first couple of days cleaning my house. By Tuesday I thought, what am I doing? I have a sitter for a week and here I am cleaning!"

The role of managing a household seems to find Tammy locked into this role even when she is afforded time to seek interests beyond this. She acknowledges that this, along with fear, has also kept her from seeking intimacy. Tammy tells me that she has not involved herself in a committed relationship since her daughter was born. Although part of her desires intimacy, another part of her avoids it. Tammy continues with this topic by relating a story about February break when the realization struck her that she had time for herself.

"I made the impulsive move to go out and listen to the Blues. I love live music." Tammy explains that the lead singer in the band that was playing approached her and, after talking for a long while, invited her for lunch the next day. "We ended up spending the next couple of days together. It was very cool and at the same time safe. He's from Vancouver and I knew there was no possibility for a long term relationship. It's like I didn't want to set myself up for failure. I was in that situation only because I knew that nothing could come of it."

"What fabulous insight into yourself," I respond, confident that, when it is time, Tammy will work through this challenge as she has others that have presented themselves in her life. Still, I am interested to know if Tammy ever sees herself marrying again. "I ask myself that a lot," she responds. "I have gone deeper into this question and asked myself what marriage is about. For me, it doesn't mean that I will stay home and do the domestic things while he gets to go out and have a career and mingle with people and live.

I want an equal partnership. I don't want to feel like I'm someone's property."

In dealing with her own issues, Tammy approaches her struggles with relationships and loneliness the same way she has dealt with other challenges in her life, committing herself to developing other areas of her life while she quietly self-reflects and continues to learn more about herself.

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Tammy's presence in my life has been a gift to me. It is a gift that runs much deeper than the writing that has resulted from our time together. Her stories of trial laced with undying hope come to me at times when my own life feels overwhelming. The wisdom she has shared has made me wiser. Ultimately, it is in this sharing that I recognize the true power and effect we as humans can have on one another, regardless of how fleeting that time together may be.

There will always be questions about Tammy's life that, for me, will arise and remain unanswered. As my time on this project draws to a close, I sit in more comfort with this realization, because Tammy, too, is still searching in many ways. I know that it is these questions that will keep Tammy close to me for many years to come; the pages left unwritten will encourage me to continue exploring and learning. A treasure left sealed is worthless. A book that is closed offers no knowledge.

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As I make my out of the kitchen one last time, past the colorful drawings and affirmation statements housed within, into the living room, carpeted in toys, I am relieved but somewhat saddened that this piece of my research experience is finally behind me. I say my good-byes to Tammy, but thoughts of her and her children remain in the forefront of my mind throughout that last hour-long drive back to my own home.

Each time I think of Tammy, read her words, feel her passion for life, I am pulled back in time when my own life looked much like Tammy's. I know her passion for learning, the love she feels for her children, the exhilarating freedom of living the campus life. I have felt the sense of personal accomplishment when people, marks, and my own self acknowledged my effort and achievements. I revel in the excitement of Tammy's current journey.

But another reality sits looming as I realize it is near time to end Tammy's story. The struggles Tammy has lived with and will potentially encounter weigh on my mind; they will soon be dissected and examined in the next section of my thesis. In a way I fear this analysis may somehow tarnish the sense of personal strength that Tammy alludes to throughout her story. One part of me wants to offer this analysis as a means of provoking you towards critical thought. Another part of me wants Tammy's story and spirit to remain at the forefront of your memory, as it has in mine.

I can only hope that by presenting both sides, they can live together, in unison, within your hearts and minds.

The details of Tammy's story and her resilience in overcoming her challenges have lent inspiration to my own life and the work that you hold in your hands right now. Yet, some of Tammy's most powerful statements come, not out of the pain she has endured, but in celebrating the meaning that her university

experience plays for her in the present day.

Ultimately, I want the degree, but it's more than that. I feel alive. I have something to live for. I have goals and goals are so important in my life... I've come out on the other side of my challenges a much better person. I feel strong and capable. I just know whatever I set my mind to I can do it now. University has changed how I look at the world... It has helped me to understand I am worthy. I am worth it.

I feel honored to have sat in the presence of this incredible woman.

"Life itself is like a school. We're always learning. We're always growing and changing and it doesn't just end with university, it is just the beginning..." (Tammy, December 10, 2002).

#### Epilogue: A Message from Tammy

When I met with Tammy I invited her to add to this research in her own way of expressing herself. Following our final face to face meeting, Tammy emailed the following message to me. I have included it here verbatim. What follows Tammy's writing is my own response to her letter.

I was thrilled at having the chance to take part in this study and thought Kathy would be interviewing several moms and creating some sort of "compilation" of all of our stories. I didn't realize the focus would be solely on me.

After reading Kathy's narrative, I was truly touched and moved. After what seemed like my stumbling and awkward efforts to answer her questions, her writing drew out a clear and eloquent story of my strengths, my pain, my determination, and my passion for life.

As a lone mother I find that people generally don't notice how much more of an effort I have to put into a day just to keep up, so I am grateful to Kathy for taking on this study and sharing my story.

I find I rarely stop and give myself credit for my accomplishments. There are times when I truly feel as though I am carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders. For Kathy to see in me what I always believed to be my strengths surprised me, but also made me glad that I shared my time with her. Her writing and observations made me feel very proud of myself. Every time I look at my kids I know my hard work and struggles are worth it -- I never doubt that for a minute -- but I do wonder some days how I manage to do all that I do.

I heard a simple saying a few months ago that struck a chord with me and I have pretty much adopted it as my own now. "Life's a journey...not a destination."

I can choose to stay "stuck" in my life and face inevitable unhappiness, or I can decide to face life head-on and see what's just up ahead. I choose to face it head-on. I still believe that I'm destined for something wonderful, and I never know when I may get there, but I choose to keep going even when life gets tough.

I also wanted to expand a little on a couple questions that you asked me last time...

1. What do we do without due to lack of money?

This is something I tend to downplay because I'm so used to "doing without" that I tend not to dwell much on what we don't have, and just be thankful for what we do have. Sometimes it's tough -- like when the car breaks down for the 3rd or 4th time in as many months, and I find myself dreaming about owning a "newer" one. Or when my son or daughter wants a new bike, and I can't get it for them. Or when we're at the park, and I see all the teams in uniforms and all the soccer moms and realize that my kids won't have such opportunities. Or the regular trips to Value Village so we can all have something to wear, because we can't afford "regular priced" clothing. Or the fact that we still rent government housing. I would love to be able to buy my own house someday, but that may not happen for many, many years. So I try to make do with what we've got and remind myself that things could always be much worse.

2. Do you ever get lonely?

Sure I get lonely...of course I get lonely...I'm human after all. I guess I try to fill that void with friends, whether they're male or female and I try not to buy into the illusion that somebody else is going to make me happy. I try to do that for myself. I don't believe that a man is going to come into my life and make everything wonderful like a fairy tale. I have come to accept that it's because of poor choices with men that things are the way they are for me, and the reason why I have to do my parenting solo. So, I just try to plug away and stay focused at school, enjoy my friends and live my life.

Take care,

Tammy

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **REFLECTIONS ON TAMMY'S NARRATIVE**

During the time I sat with Tammy, listening to her and watching her emotions unfold as she told her story, I was given an immediate sense of those factors and experiences in her life that were significant to her. Following my interviews with Tammy, I spent several months immersing myself in data. I listened to our audio taped conversations time and again, read through the transcripts of the interviews, and wrote down many of my own intuitive feelings as I reflected on her story. In doing all of this, I interpreted what I understood as significant and pivotal pieces of her experience as a mother and university student. My purpose in writing Tammy's story was to provide an evocative account of her experiences, so that the reader might understand not only the fact about her being a teen mom, but the feeling and emotional depth of her experience.

Initially, when I wrote this chapter, I presented each of the significant components of Tammy's story under separate headings. Once it was complete, I presented her story as five major themes: motherhood, external challenges, internal challenges, external support, and internal support, with several sub-themes within each. However, in presenting significant events and issues in this fashion, I felt as if I had lost sight of the focus of my thesis. Presenting themes in this manner did not capture the dynamics of Tammy's experience. Thus, I determined to search for a format that would express Tammy's personality and integrate Tammy's many identities, lone-mother and full-time university student (to name a few), into the whole.

What struck me, time and again, as I immersed myself in Tammy's story, was that there seemed to be a process of personal development that existed within her story. Aside from defining this process, I interpreted significant personal beliefs and experiences woven within Tammy's narrative. After considerable thought, I determined to reflect on Tammy's narrative by integrating themes and process. What emerged then was an analysis laid out in chronological fashion under the following headings: Discouragers: Factors that Prevented Tammy from Pursuing University Sooner; Encouragers: What Prompted Tammy to Pursue University; and Motivators: What Keeps Tammy Going .

Following this discussion about Tammy's experience in terms of process, I have expanded upon from a societal perspective many of the challenges Tammy faced. There were instances within Tammy's narrative that spoke to the power of societal ideologies and master narratives in Tammy's experience. Included in these is a discussion on how the "Good Mother Myth" (Doyle & Paludi, 1998) impacted on Tammy's experience as a young, lone-mother. I also discuss Tammy's emphasis on her growing sense of independence and relate this to the influence that societal dichotomies such as independence verses dependence had on Tammy's experience.



### Discouragers: Factors That Delayed Tammy from Pursuing University

When I was going through high school I'd always wanted to attend university but I kind of got side tracked when I got pregnant with my son. (Tammy, December. 10, 2002)

Tammy's desire to pursue a university education had existed years before she eventually enrolled. As the preceding quotation states, however, Tammy's unexpected pregnancy at the age of 17, and birth of her child at 18, brought a change in plans. During her first pregnancy, Tammy dropped out of high school, attributing her decision to the struggles she encountered in maintaining her grades and attending class while pregnant. As acknowledged in the literature review, pregnant adolescents commonly drop out of high school for such reasons (Linares, Leadbeater, Kato, & Jaffe, 1991).

Although she did return to complete her high school diploma following the birth of her son, Tammy's university aspirations waned as she encountered the demands and challenges of parenting and supporting her son. She simply did not believe that she could handle the pressure of combining parenting and university. As found in the literature, aspiration plays an important role in determining educational attainment. Despite this, adolescent mothers with educational aspirations prior to motherhood, such as was the case with Tammy, often set aside their educational goals as the demands of parenting become a reality (Camerena, Minor, Melmer, & Ferrie, 1998).

Tammy's commitment to her children is apparent early on as she described the personal changes she made to her lifestyle immediately after discovering her first pregnancy.

I realized I had to grow up in a big hurry; like over night. While I was pregnant I was very responsible, ate carefully, looked after myself well. So, when I got pregnant with my son it was the end of party mode.

Lifestyle changes also included changes to Tammy's long-term goals. Not only did she set aside her social agenda, but impending motherhood brought an end to her career in modeling and pursuit of a career in the military. Within weeks of giving birth to her son, Tammy returned to high school and eventually went on to pursue various employment opportunities, suggesting that parenthood and her identity as a mother was, in part, defined by her ability to support her son financially.

The changes that Tammy encountered during her pregnancy and following the birth of her first child are reflective of the personal changes that many women face upon motherhood. "Becoming a mother requires a redefinition of one's identity. Mothers abandon their own interests because of necessary service to the child" (Donelson, 1999, p. 441). Although Donelson's (1999) research is generalized to women who become mothers, Smithbattle and Leonard's (1998) narrative study focuses on the experiences of adolescent mothers. Their work revealed that adolescent mothering can, in some cases, be looked upon as a corrective experience that replaces egoistic individualism and high-risk behavior with healthier personal habits and a tendency to place responsibility towards one's child above personal desires.

Reflecting on Tammy's story, I note that she, too, speaks of the process of change and reevaluation of her life that began taking place soon after discovering her pregnancy. She began to exchange

individualistic actions with those that focused on what she believed to be best for her child. Essentially, Tammy felt the commitment necessary to pursue her university aspirations would interfere with the demands of motherhood.

Tammy's definition of and growing identity as a mother also played a strong role in discouraging her from pursuing her university aspirations. As Tammy's story pressed on, her narrative provides a sense of the internal struggles that emerged as her life became centred around the needs of others. Donelson (1999) explains that social identity also changes as women devote more of their energy to the commitments related to motherhood. She states that motherhood often results in fatigue and issues of self-doubt as women struggle to meet the needs of their children. In addition, societal views and expectations surrounding motherhood contribute to the anxiety felt by many women upon motherhood. As will be discussed in this chapter, understanding the struggle that Tammy faced goes deeper than her individual experience.

The fatigue and self-doubt Tammy faced is reflected in her experience as she spoke of the issues she encountered in supporting her son financially, developmentally, and emotionally. Although Donelson's (1999) work takes a general view of women as mothers, the research of Polakow, Kahn, and Martin (1998) focuses on lone-mothers. Fatigue and self-doubt are escalated when economic struggle burdens lone-mothers. Issues such as balancing long hours at low paying jobs with the responsibilities of parenting were common among the single mothers in Polakow, Kahn, and Martin's (1998) study. Tammy touches on the personal impact of such challenges throughout her story.

Tammy spoke of her sense of dissonance during her son's early years. Although providing for her son financially was important, she spoke of the guilt she felt in being physically separated from him while she worked. Her internal struggle suggests the importance that spending time with her child played in Tammy's vision of motherhood. Tammy also acknowledged that the emphasis she placed on meeting her children's basic needs initially played a role in discouraging her from pursuing university full time.

I thought it would be impossible with children. I thought there was no way I'd have enough time...  
I just didn't think I would be able to meet the expectations in terms of the academics while still being a good mom. (Tammy)

Tammy's story also suggests that she based her definition of motherhood upon providing her son with a traditional family of a mother and father. Although her definition of family is never clearly defined, Tammy spoke of marrying into an abusive relationship which in her own words "was horrible and I stayed way too long." The following quotation emphasizes the value, security, and meaning Tammy placed, at one time, on having a partner: "I decided that I am okay and I am strong and I don't need someone in my life to give me that." Statements much like this one are sprinkled throughout Tammy's story and acknowledge that, prior to this revelation, Tammy felt as if she needed a partner in her life. Following through on the assumption that traditional values guided much of Tammy's life following the birth of her son, as well as the obvious importance she placed on committing time to relationships in her life, it seems natural that a commitment to university did not align itself with Tammy's focus at the time.

Tammy's initial emphasis in providing her son with a father-figure is consistent with the broader patterns expressed in Donelson's (1999) work. Donelson states that it is common for women who are adolescent mothers to find themselves in conflict with tradition. "Adolescent girls who have a high commitment to marriage and family... tend to have lower occupational aspirations as well as lower self-esteem than other girls" ( p. 441). This statement reflects not only the role that traditional values played in discouraging Tammy to enroll in university, but the role that her self-worth played as well.

As Tammy proceeded to take a more reflexive approach to analyzing her life before university, she began to share the personal dynamics that interfered with her desire to pursue a university degree. A lack of self-confidence and low self-worth laid claim to a sense of doubt in her ability to do well in school.

I'd heard of many people failing and dropping out of university and saying, you know, this isn't what I thought it would be. It kind of haunts you... It was a fear of mine before I started because I hadn't had a lot to feel good about up to that point. (Tammy)

In her work (cited in Van Stone, Nelson & Niemann, 1994), Cheng finds that one important determinant in academic attainment among lone-mothers is self-confidence. Admittedly, Tammy struggled in this domain. Tammy's former lack of confidence reflects a common phenomenon within our society, where studies have found that females have more trouble than males in developing a positive and realistic view of their abilities and confidence in them. This is a pattern that holds true from elementary experiences and throughout college years (Donelson, 1999).

As we have read, Tammy's story to this point and her reasons for not pursuing university align themselves with much of the literature in this area. Tammy cited several reasons for not pursuing university sooner. Role demands upon motherhood prevented Tammy from attending university. Tammy acknowledged fatigue and increasing doubt that she could successfully add the role of student to her list of responsibilities. Motherhood found Tammy's identity, values, and priorities changing. No longer focused solely on her individual needs and desires, she became devoted to providing for her child. She acknowledged guilt at the thought of spending time away from her son. As Tammy's energy resources were depleted, her sense of self-efficacy and confidence became drained following several unfulfilling attempts to support herself and her son financially.

Next Tammy chose an alternative common to young mothers; she sought financial and emotional stability through marriage. Unfortunately, Tammy's story brings forth other issues as she struggled with abuse. As Tammy lived through the emotional havoc resulting from abuse, her sense of self-worth dwindled even further. At this point, university was not even an option in Tammy's identity. Having fought the same battle, with many different faces, only to meet recurring defeat, Tammy found herself feeling as if she had depleted her options, as if she had resigned herself to the fact she would remain living within the discomforts of poverty.

Reviewing this portion of Tammy's story tends to paint a bleak and rather hopeless picture of her future. Although discouraging, it is essential to critically acknowledge these dynamics because, the literature will acknowledge, situations involving poverty and abuse among young mothers and lone-

mothers in general, are common. These issues will be discussed in future sections of this paper.

Encouragingly, Tammy did overcome these challenges that, often times, hold young mothers back from pursuing their academic aspirations. In studying the dynamics surrounding these changes, educators and others will reach a greater understanding and achieve the ability to encourage other young mothers to follow a path similar to Tammy's.

#### Encouragers: Factors That Prompted Tammy to Pursue University

Some of it's just knowing when you make the decision. Either things will go your way to help steer you that way or things will steer you away from that. (Tammy, December 10, 2002)

In the previous section, I explored factors that delayed Tammy from fulfilling her goal to earn a university degree. As Tammy's story acknowledges, not until the birth of her second child did she determine to work towards this goal. Interestingly, Tammy's experience contrasts with the research literature that finds a negative correlation between repeat pregnancy among women who were adolescent mothers and educational attainment (Manlove, 1998). Tammy decided to go to university following the birth of her second child. This discrepancy with the extant research makes the importance of understanding Tammy's resilience even more important.

As Tammy spoke of the influences surrounding her decision to enroll in university, a distinct change occurred in the way she described and interpreted the challenges before and following the birth of her daughter. In this section, I will detail the factors that Tammy believed were essential in making her decision. In following sections, I will explore the dynamics behind this change in Tammy's perceptions. Although Tammy's story reflects the notion of resilience as process (Werner, 1992), a significant question remains: "Why do some individuals exemplify resilience, while other individuals succumb to the risks and obstacles in their lives?" By studying Tammy's story, I have found an insight into this question.

Tammy attributed her changed perspective on life, personal growth, and understanding in the years preceding university as the strongest factor influencing her decision to pursue post-secondary education. This growth, she stated, was the result of many painful lessons that ultimately led to greater personal empowerment. But why did Tammy come to perceive her struggles as positive challenges rather than maintaining a sense of defeat in the face of obstacles? Tammy provided insight into some of the reasons..

I did go to therapy and that was my two years of personal growth and questioning myself and my life and asking Where am I headed? Why am I here? How did I get here? What choices did I make? How can I change that now? How can I learn from that? (Tammy)

Tammy's quest for self-understanding developed hand-in-hand with a growing sense of self-efficacy.

It was a tough period. There were growing pains, but I came out on the other side a much better person. I felt much stronger and more capable and I just knew that whatever I set my mind to I could do it. (Tammy)

Tammy's insight reflects findings within resiliency research, suggesting that resiliency tends to increase in the face of challenges and develops over time (Mangham, McGrath, Reid, & Stewart, 1995; Werner, 1992).

This observation is further illustrated as Tammy related her most trying struggles. She recalled the self-reflective thoughts that she began to use in her efforts to cope with ongoing challenges. Despite acknowledging a sense of low self-worth during the years prior to university, her narrative includes phrases such as "I knew I was capable of a lot more intellectually." As time progressed, particularly around the birth of her daughter, Tammy seemed to internalize these affirmations and began to seek ways to actively utilize her intellectual strengths. Obviously, although such insight is essential to Tammy's resilience, her ability to reason abstractly and to self-reflect was essential in her experience of resilience. Indeed, resilience studies have found strong links between cognitive functioning and resilience (Rak & Patterson, 1996).

Tammy's story also illustrates the development and importance that her sense of independence played in driving her towards her goals. Throughout her narrative Tammy made a direct connection between her independence and being a lone-mother, as if the experience of single parenting ultimately empowered her.

Initially, Tammy related her struggles with childcare, poverty, poor working conditions, and her determination to marry in her effort to create a stable family for her son. Essentially, she portrayed herself as a woman struggling to overcome the challenges she faced as a lone-mother. It is obvious that, at one time, Tammy perceived her lone-parent status in a negative light. Interestingly, however, over time, Tammy came to perceive her greatest hurdle as an important asset in her personal development. Tammy developed a sense of strength and growing determination in relation to her lone-mother status.

One of the characteristics that Carey et al (1998) cite as common among adolescent mothers who pursue educational aspirations is that they tend to rebel against the negative societal views that surround them. Tammy, too, began to celebrate rather than try to escape her status, illustrating a rebellion similar to that found in Carey et al.'s (1998) study. Tammy's words reflect her changing beliefs: "I knew I was a strong person. I mean if I wasn't, I couldn't have raised my children alone for so long."

Carey et al.'s findings reiterate how societal beliefs and ideologies serve to imprison groups of persons whose lifestyles fall outside the status quo. I shall discuss the importance and implications of encouraging equality and flexibility within our society in future sections of this chapter.

The growing sense of personal strength and self-efficacy, experienced by Tammy, was also propelled by the challenges she faced as a mother of a child with Asperger's Syndrome.

I used to joke that I have a Ph.D. in my son.... I've read many many books by psychologists dealing with my son's condition.... when you educate yourself in that way you feel more empowered. (Tammy)

Despite the variety of financial, social, and emotional challenges Tammy faced following the birth of her daughter and during the years she collected social assistance, she stated that being at home full-time

for two years helped her to feel comfortable in her decision to go to university.

I think I would have felt too guilty if I would have went [to university] immediately after she [Tammy's daughter] was born. I don't think I would have been able to focus on my studies because of the guilt. (Tammy)

During her experience of living on social assistance, Tammy recalled a specific experience that ultimately triggered her decision to apply to university: she was provided with practical information.

I believe it was January of 2000. I had a parent-aide coming into my home because I was having a lot of difficulty with my son.... she was the one that told me her daughter was going to university. I said to her there's no way I could take five classes and still manage the house and still spend time with my children and she said I would only have to take three classes to be considered full-time. So that was the deciding moment right there. (Tammy)

In summary, a combination of factors led Tammy to decide to go to university. These included counselling, emergent self-reflection and understanding, a growing sense of personal strength in reflecting upon the challenges she had faced, changing beliefs regarding her lone-parent status, a sense of empowerment in educating herself in the area of Asperger's Syndrome, and practical information.

When the time was right I just knew it... I felt strong enough and capable enough to decide yes, I'm going to go for this. I'm going to apply for university and see what happens. (Tammy)

#### What Kept Tammy Motivated to Succeed at University

I never planned when I went back that I would do so well.... it's opened far more doors than I expected. (Tammy, December 10, 2002)

Within her story, Tammy named various intrinsic and extrinsic rewards and supports that helped to maintain her focus on earning a university degree. Achieving high marks, partial student loan forgiveness based on her outstanding academic performance, and the validation she got from friends and family kept Tammy motivated towards her goal. Tammy explained that intrinsic rewards, such as her sense of personal empowerment and freedom as well as the fulfillment she received from learning, all played a large role. Tammy spoke of the importance that setting goals played in initiating her entrance into university and in driving her onward towards personal fulfillment.

I have something to live for besides my children needing me. I have goals and goals are so important in life. Without goals it's hard to feel good about yourself. (Tammy)

Although Tammy spoke with enthusiasm about her university experience, it wasn't without challenges. One of the greatest challenges Tammy faced, and has faced over the years, relates to the issue of finding reliable childcare. The support she received from her daughter's daycare as well as from her parents provided some release from this chronic struggle.

The childcare [at the university] I have is just amazing. I think that that's probably the key right there when you don't have to worry if she's okay. That's a huge help. (Tammy)

Although Tammy admitted that a lack of quality childcare in the evening hours meant she often

missed out on social opportunities, her enthusiasm for life and the benefits university has brought seemed to far outweigh the challenge of finding trustworthy babysitters. Tammy also attributed the social support she attained through university as essential to her continued enthusiasm.

You can't help but make friends when you go to school. You know, there's so many different people. You're pretty much guaranteed to click with someone whether they're in the same boat or not.... That's where I get a lot of my emotional support. It just helps to be able to talk to somebody else who knows how crazy it is. Most of my friends at school don't have children, so they are very supportive in the way of saying "you must be doing well if you can do all this that I'm doing except you have two children as well." So they're very affirming in that way. It's a big help when I don't feel like I'm doing very well for someone else to stand back and be able to see that and say "you're doing fine." (Tammy)

Attaining balance remained a constant struggle for Tammy. Yet, time and experience guided her through this challenge as well. Tammy spoke of the guilt she struggled with in having to divide her time between school work and her children. Obviously, her dual roles left her struggling to make time for herself.

I just wish there were more hours in the day.... I'm more conscious this year that I need this balance and I'm making an effort to try to meet the balance. So I'm setting more limits.... I save my Friday nights for me. That's my sanity time. (Tammy)

Interestingly, the issue of process seems constantly present in Tammy's narrative as she met with new challenges. The previous quote acknowledges Tammy's never-ending quest to work through, rather than fight against, the challenges that faced her.

Balance is also attained through Tammy's attitude.

If things I've planned don't work out I'm okay with having to change them, having to be flexible and say 'okay that didn't work out. Let's move on'. I don't sit there and dwell on it. (Tammy)

Again, Tammy's ability to be flexible relates to Werner's (1992) resilience research that finds this attribute a common factor found among resilient individuals. Many of the motivating factors that Tammy attributed to her ongoing success are reflected in the resiliency findings in the work of Henderson (1997). Among these are capacity for a connection to learning, self-motivation, confidence, external support systems, access to resources, and goal-setting.

Overall, Tammy stated that the positive benefits that her experience provided her children also kept her motivated and convinced that university was the best decision for her children as well as herself.

I am seeing my son being proud of me when I bring home a paper with a good mark and he says "way to go mom." I guess it's given him the courage too, to try hard in school. I've seen only good things coming from him, from both my children. My daughter's going to daycare; I was a little scared of that but she loves going there now and she has a lot of friends there that she wouldn't have made if I hadn't gone back to school. She's blossoming as well. I was scared at first because you worry that your kids are going to feel abandoned or something but they're seeing how happy I

am now and it's rubbing off on them. (Tammy)

The positive outcomes for her children that Tammy associated with her university experience is reflected in the literature. Van Stone et al.'s (1994) work found that children of lone-mothers who attained post-secondary education benefited on many levels. On the whole, these children benefited behaviorally, emotionally, socially, and academically because their mothers' developed greater skills in each of these areas during their academic experience.

Essentially, the positive rewards Tammy and her children reaped as a result of her university experience kept Tammy motivated towards her goals, despite continued challenges such as finding balance in her life and adequate childcare outside regular school hours. The following quotation reflects how all-encompassing this experience was to Tammy and her children.

By my children seeing me empower myself, it gives them hope. It gives them something to shoot for too. Even if they don't attend university, ultimately they can see by my choices how I have taken my own life into my hands and I don't depend on anyone else to motivate me or do that for me. (Tammy)

#### Significant Events: Linking Emotional Themes to Needs

The preceding pages have outlined the situational and personal factors that initially kept Tammy from pursuing university, later encouraged her to enroll and attend university, and ultimately kept her motivated when she enrolled in university. The factors that Tammy attributed to each of these topics are reflected in current literature, focused on risks of adolescent pregnancy and resiliency. Indeed, Tammy met with many challenges along the way. Yet, the question remains, why did Tammy recognize and utilize these factors in a way that resulted in the success she currently experiences?

What seemed apparent to me as I immersed myself in Tammy's story was that she went through a process. I have aligned this finding with Werner's (1992) work, suggesting resiliency functions as process. The process that Tammy went through is one that initially found her seemingly defeated and fatigued by her challenges. Yet, as time went on, Tammy moved towards the growing perception that challenge was empowering; in fact, overcoming the adversity she faced became a huge motivator.

In this section, I have provided an overview of the process of resilience that Tammy has gone through. It will serve as a basis for deeper exploration and greater understanding of the dynamics that influenced changes in Tammy's life. Ultimately, I have analyzed and critiqued Tammy's experience to provide practical suggestions for supporting other individuals who share challenges in common with Tammy.

What follows is a chronological account of specific, significant events in Tammy's life that she alluded to time and again.. As I listened and reflected upon Tammy's story, it struck me that particular feelings seemed to characterize Tammy's experience within each of these different periods in her life. Tied into these emotional themes are Tammy's reaction to her situation and her expression of her need at these times. Ultimately, I have made a connection between Tammy's feelings and her needs.



Tammy's story began as an adolescent high school student who found herself unexpectedly pregnant. Her story described fear and uncertainty, combined with an obvious sense of shock at becoming unexpectedly pregnant. Immediately, Tammy redefined her identity to reflect her pregnancy status as she began to change her "carefree partying lifestyle" to one that focused on her physical health and a growing sense of responsibility to her developing child. In this, we are also provided a sense of the anticipation that Tammy felt towards motherhood.

During this time, as well, Tammy experienced increased stress and confusion. Feeling overwhelmed, Tammy decided to drop out of high school. Essentially, she created a picture of herself as a young woman who was seemingly "caught between two worlds": that of the adolescent world characterized, in North American society, by peers and high school, and that of the adult world as defined by her impending parenthood. Tammy's decision to drop out of high school reflects the difficulty she experienced in integrating these worlds as she learned to redefine herself and her relationship to others around her. In summary, Tammy experienced a variety of feelings while she discovers that she was pregnant: shock, fear, and uncertainty about her. Her positive lifestyle changes suggest feelings of responsibility towards her unborn child.

Tammy described her pregnancy as a very dark period in her life. She experienced conflict with her parents and felt cut off from and stigmatized by her peers at school. Dropping out of high school resulted from her feelings of being overwhelmed by her situation. Essentially, Tammy's feelings indicated a need for emotional and practical support to help her deal with the fear and alienation she was experiencing while she was pregnant.

Tammy's story then leads into her experience following the birth of her son. Having dropped out of high school during pregnancy, Tammy was immediately prompted by his birth to return to school to earn her high school diploma. The feelings of intense connection to her son and motherhood during this time were matched only by her uncertainty and fear regarding the future.

Tammy's story is laced with a sense of urgency in creating opportunities to provide for her son. She lived the next several months, again, caught between two worlds: teenager and parent. Although Tammy gave no outward acknowledgment of her needs at this time; the challenges she described following the birth of her son, acknowledge these needs. Her fear and uncertainty regarding the future insinuated a need for greater practical and emotional support as well as flexibility and guidance for Tammy's future options. Tammy, it seems, was jolted from the world of adolescence into the world of adulthood. The lack of transition led Tammy to experience anxiety and, as she explained throughout her story, to make decisions often based on this sense of urgency rather than rational, well-planned decisions.

When Tammy gave birth to her son she described intense feelings of love and responsibility towards him. Her commitment to her son intensified the responsibility she felt she needed to provide for him. Tammy returned to high school when her son was two weeks old. This was a period of transition for Tammy who had gone from viewing herself as a carefree teenager to a responsible parent. Tammy explained that she felt a closer connection to her teachers, who were also parents, than her peers.

Essentially, it was through her contact with her teachers that Tammy's sense of isolation decreased. Although her need for social support was met in this way, Tammy continually experienced anxiety about her future. Her feelings indicated a need for emotional support as well as practical guidance in the area of life transitions.

Tammy finished school and left her parents' home, determined to create a life for herself and her son. Following the completion of her high school diploma, Tammy emphasized the monetary and practical concerns she faced as a lone-parent supporting her son. Time and again, she discussed the implications of financial struggles and everyday, parenting-related stresses. As time went on and Tammy faced continued stress within these areas, her sense of growing frustration and helplessness became apparent. Feelings of helplessness, guilt, and frustration were exasperated by a discrepancy between Tammy's definition of a good mother and her lifestyle. She believed a good mother was physically available to her child. Yet, Tammy had to work full-time to provide for her son. Mothering, working full-time, and enduring chronic stress left Tammy fatigued. Unfortunately, at a time when Tammy needed to nurture and focus on herself more than ever, the story she told rarely acknowledged this. Tammy's priority at this time was in caring for her son. We seldom, if ever, are given a sense of Tammy's identity as an individual.

Tammy described her attempts to escape from the challenges she continually faced. Tammy attended technical college, finding work afterwards. Unfortunately, challenges similar to those she hoped to escape characterized her work following her college diploma: non-traditional working hours and lack of access to flexible and quality childcare. Further, she continued to struggle against the feelings of her desire to be near her son and her commitment to support him by working full-time.

The feelings of fatigue Tammy experienced at this time were indicative of her need to escape from chronic stress. The financial and work-related challenges Tammy faced point to her need for practical support and work-place flexibility. Her feelings of guilt as a mother indicated a need for emotional support.

Marriage became Tammy's next option. However, far from alleviating her stress, it escalated as abuse, and depleted self-esteem enveloped Tammy. Despite this, she stayed within the relationship, which added to a growing sense of powerlessness and frustration. Ultimately, this period of attempted escape from the hardships Tammy faced as a lone-parent added a new dimension to Tammy's struggles. Her self-esteem was increasingly diminished and her sense of isolation increased. Her feelings at this time suggested a need for education and support about abuse. Tammy's lack of emotional and social support also pointed to her need for positive and supportive relationships.

Ultimately, Tammy, seemingly having exhausted all other avenues, escaped by moving back near her family of origin. This guaranteed that her son would receive nurturing care while she continued to work at several part-time, service-related jobs. Ultimately, this move, in Tammy's view, symbolized giving into the struggles she had fought so hard to overcome.

Regardless of Tammy's situation, her narrative to this point acknowledges her sense of anxiety in terms of the future. It also acknowledges her depleting sense of personhood and self-worth as she faced chronic stressors in an attempt to meet her son's basic needs. Repeated challenges find Tammy seeking

escape from the personal and financial struggles surrounding her. Tammy creates a picture of a woman fatigued and defeated by continued obstacles. Companionship, practical support, opportunities for success, and escape from everyday life were needs expressed through Tammy's challenges.

Nearly eight years after the birth of her son, still weighted down by personal and financial struggles, Tammy again became pregnant. Although Tammy spoke of the fear she had of the future, her reflections of this time connoted resentment and re-evaluation. Tammy spoke of her growing sense of disillusion in striving to shape her life around the ideals that she held. Essentially, she acknowledged her growing lack of faith in external factors to bring her the security she sought. She began to review the tactics she used to try to bring this security and, rather than continue along this path, she determined to explore other avenues. Tammy's narrative shifted along with her story as she described her efforts to critically analyze her beliefs. She began to look inside rather than outside for the security she sought. As she described this period of re-evaluation, her words and her story began to emphasize a developing sense of personal power as she acknowledged herself as a survivor. Tammy began to focus on what she had attained and the strengths that had enabled her to survive her challenges.

Motherhood, second time around, found Tammy in a much different frame of mind than in the years following the birth of her son. Tammy became increasingly protective of her children and acknowledged her determination to "go it alone." She also acknowledged a change in her values as she placed priority on staying at home with her children full-time. At this point in Tammy's life she chose to remain single and to sustain her family through welfare. Although this was a period where Tammy was firm in her decision and her choice enabled her to escape the guilt she experienced in being physically separated from her children, she also acknowledged the pain and sense of humiliation that resulted from living on welfare.

During the period when Tammy collected welfare, she described her sense of personal disgrace, depression, and loneliness. Tammy's narrative provides several direct statements reflecting systemic issues that played a large role in her sense of worthlessness. She told me that while collecting welfare, she had very limited choice in terms of living accommodations and was forced to reside in a rundown apartment dwelling that left her feeling caged and isolated. In stark contrast, Tammy's current home was a well-kept duplex situated within a friendly neighborhood. Tammy explained that this improvement in her living conditions, both the quality of her home and sense of community, attributed largely to her sense of well-being. Further, Tammy felt she was treated with disrespect and hostility by individuals within the Social Services system itself and by others in general. Simply entering the Social Services office was a devastating experience for Tammy. Unfortunately, she spiraled deeper into depression as her hunger for positive experiences and human interaction was often met with prejudice and negative assumptions.

Her need for support and encouragement towards greater self-reflection was provided through counselling. On her own, and through necessity, Tammy began to fulfill her need for power through self-education and advocating for her son. However, Tammy admitted that social supports were few and far between, despite the fact that this was a great need. Essentially, she found alternative methods of fulfilling

this need. Interestingly, while Social Services provided her a parent-aide to help her to deal with her son's challenging behaviors, it was the social aspects of these visits that Tammy benefited from more than anything else. Although the struggle was long and difficult, counselling, the social support of her parent-aide, as well as practical information she provided Tammy about university, Tammy's academic and self-learning eventually provided her with the strength to enroll in university.

Once enrolled in university full-time, Tammy's self-esteem and sense of personal power began to flourish. In reflecting upon her past challenges from her vantage point as a successful student, she saw her previous experiences as essential to the more recent, positive changes in her life.

Regardless of where Tammy was in her narrative, she characterized her experience by an underlying fear and anxiety about the future, particularly in her ability to secure her children's well-being. Tammy's experience acknowledges the importance of supporting young mothers and providing them avenues to encourage a sense of safety and security in their lives. Other issues that run throughout Tammy's narrative and that provide insight into areas of support and need are her concern for her children, loss of individual identity, isolation, and dissonance between her goals as a mother and what she was realistically able to provide.

Although Tammy's story is one that is successful, the challenges she describes lend insight into the internal struggles that, near the beginning of her story, kept her emotionally, psychologically, and physically imprisoned. Her journey also provides insight into her needs as a young mother, some of which were practical and were or were not met by the world around her. Perhaps in acknowledging these factors we can provide insight and tools in identifying and encouraging this process in women whose stories are similar to Tammy's.

#### Connecting Needs to Process

Tammy's story has connections to a study by Krumer-Nevo (2003), who based her findings on the narrative accounts of 47 women involved in a three-year program developed in Israel. Krumer-Nevo characterizes program clients as living in "extreme and long-term economic and social deprivation" (p. 170). These women faced multiple challenges that included "poor housing, lack of education, unemployment, debt, parent-child and spousal conflicts, physical illness and substance abuse of one or more of the family's members" (p. 170).

Krumer-Nevo revealed three patterns of help reception within this study. The patterns found over the course of the three-year program reflected the women's experiences of change. Following their involvement in the three-year program, women were asked to describe the nature of the help that they received. Krumer-Nevo's study suggests the women fell into one of three patterns in interpreting the help that they received. Interestingly, the patterns found within Krumer-Nevo's study run parallel to the personal changes found within Tammy's story. The implications of this observation will be discussed following a closer look at these patterns.

A number of women participating in the Krumer-Nevo's (2003) study described feelings of being

overwhelmed by the stressors and suffering in their lives. What developed out of this common finding was the "Calming Pattern" (p. 169). Essentially, the Yachdav Program, which Krumer-Nevo's study is based upon, offered to these women distance and escape from suffering. Many of the women involved in the study, as did Tammy during much of her story, are consumed by the numerous challenges in their lives. Like Tammy, many of the women in the Krumer-Nevo study, cited fatigue and a need to escape from chronic suffering. Although the Krumer-Nevo study looks at patterns among women as opposed to process, we see in Tammy's story that only after she achieved a sense of escape from her overwhelming challenges did she build her energy and focus on developing herself.

The second pattern of helping found within the Krumer-Nevo (2003) study is referred to as the "Empowerment Pattern" (p. 169). Women within this group, identified as utilizing the program supports, focused on accruing support to further their education and to build their skills and their confidence. Tammy's focus turned to similar pursuits after she found a means of escaping from several significant challenges: abuse, childcare issues, work-related issues, and the guilt of being separated from her children during the day. Only after she escaped these challenges did Tammy seem to find the energy to work towards self-empowerment. She sought counselling, began to educate herself in the area of Asperger's Syndrome, and attempted to start her own home-based business.

The third pattern identified within the Krumer-Nevo (2003) study is the "Re-biography Pattern" (p. 169). Women identified as falling into this pattern were more focused on internal development than changing external aspects of their lives. They utilized support to bring about greater self-awareness: "The program changes and reformulates their life story and their personal biography. Now they see themselves in a more positive light and they take an active role, define objectives and work to attain them" (p. 172). As Tammy's story progressed, we see she became more self-reflective and she began to perceive her challenges in a more positive light. Here again, Tammy's story seems to reflect characteristics of the re-biography pattern.

Krumer-Nevo's study acknowledges that the participants' ability to be helped is not uniform and that the nature of perceived need depends on women's experiences of the challenges in their lives. Those women who attributed difficulties to external factors tended to utilize supports as a means to escape. Women who perceived themselves as directly influencing their situation were found within patterns that focus on personal development such as "The Empowerment Pattern" and particularly "The Re-Biography Pattern."

Indeed, there are weaknesses in drawing comparisons between Tammy's experience and the experiences of the women in the Krumer-Nevo (2003) study. The Krumer-Nevo study takes place within Israel, a cultural and political climate very different from Tammy's. Neither study provides longitudinal data to ground such findings. My interpretation, however, suggests that further research may prove valuable. The strength of this research is that others may apply my understanding of Tammy's experience at a personal or professional level when they consider adolescent mothers.

Krumer-Nevo's (2003) study does not explore process or progression from one pattern to the next.

Interestingly, Tammy's story and the process of change found within it closely mirror the patterns described by Krumer-Nevo. When we explore Tammy's experience in terms of Krumer-Nevo's patterns, she seems to move from "The Calming Pattern," into "The Empowerment Pattern," and then into "The Re-biography Pattern." A comparative look at Krumer-Nevo's study and Tammy's narrative can be found in Appendix E.

#### Implications for Practice and Policy

My analysis suggests that the patterns found in Krumer-Nevo's (2003) study may be part of a process of personal development that may serve to empower young and lone-mothers. Essentially, in viewing Tammy's life and the lives of other young mothers through the lens of process, implications for support of mothers in situations similar to Tammy become apparent. Given that Tammy moved through this process without "purposeful" guidance suggests that a natural inclination towards personal development may exist. It seems that when Tammy was ready, she utilized and shaped the resources within her environment to meet her "pattern of need." For example, although the purpose of the parent-aide was to provide her guidance in the area of parenting, Tammy utilized this resource in terms of social support and attaining practical information that resulted in her enrolling in university.

Ultimately, if this idea of patterns and process holds true, assessment of patterns in working with young mothers would enable supportive individuals to strategically match women to resources, based on a woman's "place" within the process. With purposeful and focused guidance, it seems logical that women would progress through this process of personal development at a faster rate than if left to their own limited resources. Ultimately, this observation suggests that greater numbers of young mothers would attain personal fulfillment. Effectively, this would alleviate many of the risks associated with adolescent parenting and increase the chances of these women and their children's chances for positive development and well-being.

Further, in reflecting upon the process of Tammy's own personal development and in viewing other young mothers through the lens of process, several important factors are acknowledged. First, adolescent mothers are human beings, continually changing and seeking personal well-being regardless of differential definitions of fulfillment. This line of thought runs contrary to society's tendency to view the plight of adolescent mothers as hopeless and problematic.

Second, the needs of young mothers that emerge when we focus upon process are driven by the individual as opposed to being driven and determined by social agencies intended to support these women. Thus, it seems that supporting young mothers means emphasizing individual needs and dynamics rather than universally based programs and policies.

Clearly, Tammy's story acknowledges several examples in which she felt discouraged, rather than supported by, social institutions and agencies whose role it was to facilitate the well-being of Tammy and her children. One example is found when Tammy determined to develop her financial and creative potential by beginning her own home business. The welfare system, however, took the financial profits that Tammy earned, discouraging her efforts to relieve her financial stress. In accord with the process

acknowledged above, Tammy's actions suggested that this may have been a critical point in her personal development because she sought opportunities for personal empowerment.

Unfortunately, in reflecting on Tammy's experience, the social programs that influenced her failed to acknowledge her personal dynamics, process, development, and needs. Taking this into account, it seems possible to encourage women to move through a process that will inspire them towards self-fulfillment and positive personal development. One way of encouraging this, in reflecting on Tammy's experiences and the findings of Krumer-Nevo, may be to focus social programs and policies on the assessment of different levels of need among young and lone-mothers.

When the patterns found within Krumer-Nevo's (2003) study are integrated with and analyzed in terms of Tammy's narrative, she presents different needs at different points in the process of developing a greater sense of personal well-being. Essentially, although Tammy moved through the process within her life seemingly by chance, she did acknowledge fundamental needs that, had she had greater support from external sources, might have alleviated some of her stressors and aided her transition through each of these three phases. Aside from external support, Tammy's story illustrates that internal and personal factors also influenced her process of personal development. Thus, acknowledging individual strengths also seems essential in supporting young mothers.

Through this thesis, I propose that Tammy's story provides an illustration of the potential benefits of assessing young mothers' needs to facilitate positive personal development. Through such a view, I advocate for social programs and policies that emphasize personal development, as well as needs and strength-based support, rather than risk-based interventions.

### Supporting Young Mothers

Women who present as extraordinarily stressed, or within the first phase of the process proposed here, can be supported if counsellors encourage them to vent and process their feelings about the overwhelming challenges they face. As was apparent in Tammy's story, her energy and self-esteem were continually depleted as she encountered challenge on top of challenge. As she stated in her narrative, however, it was not until later in life, through her experience of counselling and self-reflection, that she was able to process her experience and look from a different perspective at what had occurred. Nor was she able, until she gained external support, to step back from her situation and evaluate her future options. Until Tammy was able to find the energy to self-reflect, she focused on basic survival and caring for others, rather than her development as a person. Tammy also acknowledged how her sense of self-esteem and self-worth was depleted as she faced each challenge. Only after close evaluation of her life did she begin to recognize her strengths in having survived numerous challenges. Tammy acknowledged how important this recognition was in encouraging her towards her current successes.

Essentially, the goal in supporting young mothers who are experiencing extreme stress and overwhelming challenges is to provide them with a physical space and emotional support to vent their frustration and release their pain. Tammy acknowledged early in her story her sense of imprisonment at a

physical and emotional level. In following with the process advocated in Krumer-Nevo's (2003) study and Tammy's experience of seeking escape from surmounting stressors, offering young mothers a place and support to process their feelings seems important to enable them to move towards empowerment.

Women in Krumer-Nevo's second "Empowerment Phase" attain a great sense of calm and release from their overwhelming sense of pain. Thus, personal growth and development can occur. As we saw with Tammy, she attained a greater sense of calm by moving closer to her family who helped alleviate some of the stress she had experienced due to lack of quality and affordable childcare. The emotional turmoil she encountered due to the time she spent away from her children while working was also decreased when she claimed welfare and was able to stay home and be physically available to her children full-time. At this point in her life, Tammy's experience seemed characteristic of those women whom Krumer-Nevo placed within the Empowerment Pattern.

During this period in Tammy's life, she turned her energies towards gaining knowledge, both of herself and her son's Asperger's Syndrome. Krumer-Nevo (2003) explains that women within the empowerment category actively sought information. Essentially, their needs emphasized empowerment in learning and, as their sense of personal empowerment grew through learning, their need to vent and reflect on themselves as victims was overcome by a desire to take greater personal responsibility for their lives.

During this period in her narrative, when Tammy received social assistance and was able to take the time to learn, she also began to recognize her strengths in surviving her challenges. Although she had yet to internalize these beliefs about herself and the world around her, she spoke of her determination to turn these thoughts into reality. Tammy also stated that she began to experience greater self-worth, personal empowerment, and assertiveness as she educated herself about Asperger's Syndrome.

The goal in working with young mothers who have attained the initial support and are ready to move beyond their pain into personal empowerment is to provide them with tangible tools and support to do so. As Krumer-Nevo (2003) suggests, resources that enable women to define their strengths and set goals is a common need among women in the second phase.

Another important factor during this period of Tammy's life related to the personal reflection that took place. This too must be encouraged. In doing so, Tammy acknowledged the pain and sense of depression she faced. However, Tammy also stated that this hardship was necessary in her struggle towards personal honesty and self-understanding. Tammy's experience suggests the power of perception. Providing women with resources, such as counselling, to facilitate a positive reframing of their painful experiences may prove beneficial for women in the empowerment phase.

As women enter into the "re-biography" phase, they are rescripting their lives (Krumer-Nevo, 2003). In this stage, they come to identify unseen potential and move into a period of turning potential into reality. As Tammy entered university, actively pursuing her goal, her new found positive perspective became deeply engrained. She celebrated her past challenges, perceiving them as gifts that developed her strength, character, and skills. Essentially, she redefined herself. No longer a victim of circumstance, she perceived herself as a capable individual, responsible for her own happiness.



Despite Tammy's changed perspective, she continued to encounter stress after beginning university. She was no longer eligible for much of the support she had previously received, such as financial aide through Social Services. Finances and childcare have remained challenges for Tammy. Although her social support system grew as she met friends at university, it has been largely limited to the university context because of her financial and childcare limitations. Tammy's experience acknowledges structural barriers and the importance of continued support even after women meet their goals and redefine their lives. Tammy's situation suggests that practical support such as evening childcare, alternative classes, and the like may play an important role in supporting young mothers who are actively working towards the goals they have set.

In both Tammy's story and the Krumer-Nevo (2003) study, social support was essential in procuring personal development. As Tammy described her experience, her social support was limited primarily to natural support such as her parents and formal support such as counselling and a parent-aide. The lifestyle constraints that Tammy experienced as a single parent on welfare made it difficult for her to find and develop a strong informal social network. As Tammy entered university, she described the importance of social support that she attained from meeting other students. In this thesis, I propose that creating and offering opportunities for social support such as support groups and mentor figures are an essential component in creating programs to encourage the development of women who, like Tammy, often times feel alone and unclear as to the direction of their lives.

#### From Self to Society and Grand Narratives: Theoretical Reflections

Chapter 2 introduced the idea that both individual resiliency and societal factors impact upon the experiences and life choices of adolescent mothers within our society. This section explores and analysis these perspectives in relation to Tammy's experiences.

#### Resilience

Wolin and Wolin (1993) offer a simple definition of resilience: "the capacity to rise above adversity by developing skills that expand and ripen into lasting strengths" (p.5). What propelled Tammy towards university and many of the attributes that kept her motivated reflect much of the literature on resiliency. Tammy's story seems to reflect Werner's (1992) work, suggesting resiliency functions as process. After several years of struggle and despair, Tammy seemed to follow a process of slowly building her internal resources to a point at which she felt empowered and responsible for her personal happiness. Tammy's story illustrates different struggles and needs at different times, and having these needs met seemed to enable Tammy to develop her resilience. This observation may suggest a link between personal needs and the process of resilience.

Tammy's story also reflects many of the characteristics of resiliency noted in the literature. These characteristics noted are both internal and external. Throughout Tammy's story she exemplifies many of the personal characteristics noted by Henderson (1997), including sociability, a sense of humor,

perceptiveness, personal competence, self-motivation, and connection to learning. Interestingly, as her needs are met and she became more resilient, these internal attributes were strengthened. Tammy's sense of self-esteem, another important factor noted by Henderson (1997), also increased.

Resiliency theory is gaining tremendous respect, given a current emphasis on strength-based models. Resiliency theory stresses the capacity of individuals to be self-determining in respect to their lives. Despite Tammy's resilience, she faced many challenges that she had little power to change. Critics, however, express concerns in emphasizing individual resilience, believing that this theory fails to acknowledge the structural and systemic barriers that have a significant influence on the lives of individuals. As my study of Tammy's experience suggests, it seems essential to acknowledge issues within the broader societal scope and the role they play in shaping individual beliefs and lives.

#### A Societal View

Although Tammy's story is a personal one, she has not lived her life in a vacuum. Indeed, as the literature concerning adolescent mothers acknowledges, many of Tammy's greatest challenges and experiences as a young mother are quite common. Tammy tells a story of struggle and triumph. However, a great number of young mothers continue to live lives characterized by poverty and associated risks. Perhaps I should put this last sentence into better perspective. According to much of the literature and media surrounding teen mothers, their status is held as cause for poverty and risk. There are, however, theorists today who are critical of this opinion (Cocca, 2002; Macleod, 2002; McCarthy, 2001; Scott, London & Myers, 2002).

Macleod (2002) argues that focusing on the risks associated with adolescent childbearing serves to veil societal-constructed inequalities. Macleod contends that by placing blame for poverty on adolescent mothers, the focus is taken away from the social policies and patriarchal structures that uphold the status quo. Macleod also argues that although government efforts to help young mothers is often publicized, these efforts are not great enough to make any substantial difference on the financial and social status of adolescent mothers, particularly those who do not marry. Such efforts, Macleod states, in the form of resources and opportunities, reach far enough to effect only a minimal portion of those living under impoverished circumstances. Further, other theorists posit that resources provided to young mothers are policy-focused rather than needs-focused (Polakow, Kahn, & Martin, 1998).

Aside from the issue of poverty, literature and media tend to portray adolescent mothers as unnurturing (McCarthy, 2001). Essentially, the message given is that age and ability to nurture correspond positively with one another. However, Flanagan (cited in Garcia Coll, Surrey, & Weingarten, 1998), a pediatrician who has worked with adolescent mothers for more than ten years, has had a different experience in working with adolescent mothers. Flanagan argues that although developmental level does affect a young woman's view of motherhood, most young mothers love and care deeply for their children. Flanagan states:

[W]e also have to realize that most portrayals in the media and the research and clinical literature

on teenage mothers concentrate on the negative consequences for the children and society at large. Although these portrayals do capture the experience of some teenage mothers and their children, they fail to grasp the complexity of these families' life choices and alternatives. They marginalize their experiences and lead to interventions that are either punitive or insensitive to their more critical needs. (p. 253)

In summary, many current critical thinkers including Coll, et al (1998) and McCarthy (2001) posit that teenage childbearing has been purposefully and wrongly deemed responsible for many of the risk factors that young mothers and their children experience. They argue further that identifying adolescent mothering as an issue serves to strengthen values related to North American society's patriarchal roots.

The dynamics that often surround teenage motherhood, particularly those mothers who do not marry, threaten societal ideologies that create divisions between men and women. Unmarried mothers, regardless of age, threaten economic power systems that are upheld by the division of male and female domains, traditionally home and work. Ultimately, teenage and lone motherhood threaten relationships of power that exist due to values surrounding the nuclear family system. Thus, mothers, not the inequalities of the system itself, are focused upon. Given all of this, resilience theory, critically speaking, in emphasizing individual factors that aid in resiliency, fails to account for structural and political factors that create risk and that are difficult, if not impossible, to control at an individual level. Although resilience theory offers important insights in encouraging change, larger societal factors must also be acknowledged if attempts at long-term significant change are to take place. An example of the power and influence that societal beliefs yield can be found in the following section.

#### The "Good Mother" Myth

Although Tammy's individual personality shone through as she told her narrative, woven throughout Tammy's story were also clues to the effect that many prevalent societal ideologies had on creating her experience. Romero and Stewart (1999) explain the importance personal stories play in "reading the larger social systemic meanings in individual women's apparently 'personal' stories" (p. XII). Romero and Stewart explain that culture affects personal narrative through the creation of master narratives that they define as "stories that are so familiar they seem inevitable and obvious in their meaning, even when they happen to us. Master narratives are the stories we were taught and teach ourselves about who does what and why" (p. XIV).

Often times, argue Romero and Stewart master narratives are filled with contradictions whose purpose is to support an existing power structure influenced by gender, class, race/ethnicity, and sexuality. Ultimately, master narratives imprison certain groups of people and individuals within these groups. They do not fit the criterion to which power is assigned. Tammy's story lends clues to how her view of the world was affected internally and externally by master narratives within her culture. One such master narrative that is evident time and again throughout Tammy's story is that of the "Good Mother Myth" (Doyle & Paludi, 1998).

Indeed, from the beginning of her experience of motherhood, Tammy described her concern over the risk of raising her son as a young single woman. Tammy made the assumption of risk. Almost immediately, upon discovering her pregnancy, Tammy redirected the focus of her life from herself to her son. Her lifestyle changed radically. She replaced long-term dreams with immediate efforts to establish a means to support her son. Essentially, Tammy did all she could to be a "good mother" to her son, living an impoverished existence, working several low paying jobs just to support her child.

Aside from the financial constraints that Tammy struggled to overcome, numerous clues exist within Tammy's story as to the stress created in her life based on her beliefs surrounding what constitutes a "good mother." Here again, we see how societal messages, in this regard, weave their way into Tammy's former way of thinking. We also see how societal ideologies based on the "Good Mother Myth" run contrary to family systems that reside outside the nuclear-based ideal.

Tammy, as a lone-parent, struggled to support her son financially while still providing him with her physical presence. Tammy found no external resources to enable or encourage her to balance her desire to financially and emotionally support her child. Eventually, Tammy married with the belief that her son's needs would be better met by two parents. The "Good Mother Myth" abides by the philosophy that children are better off raised in a two-parent home, making the mother more physically available. Ironically, Tammy's emotional availability to her son was limited because abuse depleted her self-esteem. Tammy's experience points to the power of societal ideals in the lives of individuals because she stayed in her marriage "way too long" in her effort to create a life based on a societal image.

Ultimately, Tammy's experiences of the challenges she faced as an adolescent mother not only serve to illustrate her personal story, but the implications of the stigma that surrounded Tammy externally and internally. Tammy fought to uphold the social values she had ingrained about motherhood and family. However, as her story unfolded, it became clear that striving to live within the boundaries of social values resulted in the symbolic death of Tammy's individuality.

In contradiction to the "good mother" myth or "motherhood mandate" (Doyle & Paludi, 1998) that characterizes Western thinking is the seeming lack of respect and value in terms of the mothering role. Doyle and Paludi (1998) state that although women are genderized to care for others and to be "good mothers" by devoting the most of their time and energy to caring for their children, they receive no fiscal reward for taking on such an endeavor.

Indeed, it seems as though women are "doomed if they do, doomed if they don't." This is particularly true for women such as Tammy who must struggle to support children and be "good mothers" at the same time. To support their children, many are forced into low-paying, unrewarding jobs with long hours. Often times, out of necessity, their children spend many hours in the childcare system. Obviously, efforts to support their children limit the time these mothers can spend nurturing their children. Or, as in Tammy's case following the birth of her daughter, she made the choice to raise her daughter full-time. In doing so, however, she was forced to live a life of poverty, collecting welfare. Irony presents itself in that the same social system that advocates for the protection of children encourages poverty through its

structures and policies.

When the situational factors surrounding young mothers are studied from a critical vantage point, it becomes apparent that societal policy and beliefs need be dissected, as opposed to focusing blame on the women who are forced into living within such limiting circumstances.

### Independence

As suggested in the previous paragraph, "lives are embedded in particular social, historical, cultural and economic milieux" (Bateson cited in Neumann & Peterson, 1997). Ultimately, through a process of self-discovery, Tammy was able to see beyond the societal and gendered boundaries that guided her choices for many years.

The word *independence* is found numerous times throughout Tammy's narrative. Time and again within Tammy's narrative, this word is intertwined with the word *strong*, assuming that, in Tammy's definition, strength and independence coexist. Given the frequency and emphasis Tammy put on this word, I determined that it was important for me to understand what this meant to Tammy. Yet, the harder I focused on independence itself, the farther I felt in truly understanding its implications in Tammy's life.

Eventually, I decided that to understand the importance of independence for Tammy, I would focus on its void rather than its existence. For, as Tammy's story acknowledges, it is not until the birth of her daughter, when she made the conscious decision to parent without a partner, that she began to define herself as "independent." As Romero and Stewart (1999) state, "[There are] larger social systemic meanings in individual women's apparently 'personal' stories... apparently private stories are filled with social meanings" (p. XII).

Essentially, I began to analyze how Tammy's life before her independence differed from her life of dependence. In my mind, her life as a lone-mother working several jobs held many of the same qualities as her life did when she gained a greater sense of independence. This developing sense of independence began when her daughter was born. Following this, Tammy decided to sustain her family on welfare. I came to understand Tammy's meaning of independence as a state of being, as opposed to economic and livelihood factors.

To Tammy, independence, as opposed to dependence, meant letting go of a need to find validation of her personal worth through intimate relationships. Independence meant accruing the desire and motivation to determine who she was as an individual, not who she was in relation to someone else. Essentially, Tammy seemed to break free of her former obligation to create a certain type of family. It meant stepping away from the belief she had ingrained, that a "good mother" would find and provide a male figure for her children. Tammy began to redefine her life based, not on the messages she had received throughout her life, but on her own terms. This change in Tammy's world view had huge implications in determining the direction that her life would take.

Sadly, this mode of thinking also illustrates the dichotomies that exist within our society. Independence, as engulfed in male gender norms, stands in stark contrast to female gender norms related to

dependence and ultimately weakness. If we use Tammy's revelation as a metaphor for the larger society, we see how difficult it is for individuals to construe a so-called middle ground between masculinity and femininity.

Essentially, Tammy made a conscious decision to remain single, harboring her belief that an intimate relationship would “get in the way” of her current goals. She came to equate intimacy with neediness and dependence, a view which speaks volumes about the implications of genderized beliefs. One is left to wonder the meaning of this purposeful void of relationship in Tammy's life. Could it be that this is a natural flow in the process of personal development previously discussed in that it acknowledges her increasing sense of personal comfort and self-esteem?

Ultimately, greater acceptance of individuality and diversity is necessary in creating a society that is respectful of individual choice and personhood rather than providing the most tangible rewards to those who fit those masculine ideals defined within our society. Again, such beliefs lead to a lack of respect for those males and females determined to honor those aspects of themselves deemed feminine, leading to the reinforcement of the status quo.

On a personal level, the theme of independence relates to Tammy's process of self-discovery and fulfillment. As she moved closer to attaining a state of serenity and happiness, we see her focusing more and more on her own personhood, rather than external messages and ideals, to determine her life choices. From a societal perspective, acknowledging this theme emphasizes the importance and power in celebrating individuality and working, at all levels, to overcome gendered ideals that hold so many back from developing to their full potential.

#### Pulling It All Together: Discussion

Tammy is among a large number of young women in Canada who have and will become mothers during their high school years. Although she is an individual in her own right, she is not alone in the challenges and experiences she has had in becoming a young mother. Initially, I intentionally chose for this study a participant such as Tammy because of the resilience she displayed in pursuing a university education. As acknowledged in the literature review, a great number of adolescent mothers never complete high school, much less make it to university. Yet, as also explained in the literature review, education is an important factor in overcoming the poverty and associated risks that characterize many adolescent mothers. Thus, an important purpose of this thesis is to acknowledge Tammy's experience to provide insight into the dynamics that encouraged her to attend university.

It became increasingly clear, however, as I listened to Tammy's story, that limiting her experience to factors surrounding her university experience and her resilience would provide a somewhat superficial understanding of her story. As she spoke, she described challenges that seemed to me to reach beyond Tammy as an individual. Many of her greatest obstacles seemed to stem, not from Tammy herself, but the world around her. Indeed, I was continually struck by the fact that many of the issues proclaimed by feminist and critical thinkers alike wove their way into Tammy's experience. Thus, although I determined it

important to focus on Tammy's personal experience and ultimately her personal development, as her story moved forward, I also determined it was equally important to acknowledge the bigger picture as well.

What I discovered in engaging with Tammy's narrative was a process of personal development that saw Tammy move out of a cycle of low self-esteem and self-defeat towards personal empowerment and responsibility for setting and attaining her goals. After discovering and working through this process, I was excited to come across the work of Krumer-Nevo (2003). The areas of support found most effective with at-risk women within her study seemed to align closely with the needs Tammy displayed as she moved through her process of development. Combining the discoveries found within my study and the findings of the Krumer-Nevo study suggests to me that focusing on needs within the framework of process may be an effective way of facilitating positive change in the lives of young mothers.

The implications of the Krumer-Nevo (2003) study were also exciting in that they accounted for and paid respect to individual differences. Despite individual differences in life history and personal strengths and experiences, the principles applied in this study were the similar for all the women in this study. In the first year of this program, women were offered opportunities and support to reflect on their experiences and to vent emotionally. In the second year, women were offered more practical support in recognizing their strengths and in educating them in areas of personal interest. In the third year, women were encouraged and supported to actively pursue their goals and develop their potential. Personal strengths, as opposed to value-laden ideals, were emphasized in guiding women towards personal fulfillment. This suggests to me that although school may be a valuable option for some young mothers, success is not defined by academic attainment but by successfully recognizing, striving, and attaining one's unique potential. Essentially, although Tammy achieved a goal that many young mothers do not attain, that is pursuing university full-time, she has not yet fully met this goal. However, in terms of success and well-being, Tammy experienced a sense of happiness and fulfillment that she had not previously experienced. Essentially, she acknowledged the process of self-discovery, rather than the specifics of the goals she had set, brought about her sense of well-being.

Unfortunately, Krumer-Nevo's (2003) study, along with Tammy's narrative, do not provide the long-term outcomes of women who experience positive personal development. Perhaps future studies and programming will go beyond this to encourage long-term involvement with such women.

The implication of tying Tammy's experience to Krumer-Nevo's (2003) study is that it acknowledges commonalities between one woman's story and the population of women used within Krumer-Nevo's program. Thus, this study emphasizes the potential benefits of developing support programs based upon process as well as individual need. Should societal programs acknowledge process alongside need, perhaps many women would move through the process towards greater self-fulfillment much faster than they would, left to their own devices. Indeed, it took Tammy ten years, following the birth of her son, to enroll in university. At many points within her story, it seems as if Tammy was ready to move through the process. However, the support that would have propelled her was not readily available. Perhaps acknowledging this lack of structural support is important in encouraging young mothers to move

forward through the process of personal fulfillment faster than if they were to do so "by chance."

Ultimately, Tammy, from a white, middle-class background, did have many more supports and opportunities to which women raised within the cycle of poverty do not and may not ever have access to. However, such a focus would offer the practical and emotional support that presumably fostered many of Tammy's characteristics of resilience.

### Society

Of course, implications of such an approach to supporting adolescent mothers also imply that our current system must undergo radical changes. As social welfare is a current forerunner in assisting young impoverished women, this change would mean a change in the policy underlying social welfare. For instance, as Tammy's story reflects, current policies align themselves largely with the financial and child-protection aspects of assisting individuals. The proposed approach implies that emphasis would be placed on active involvement with clients, heavily weighted on emotional and personal connections, geared towards the development of client-empowerment.

Tammy's story reflects issues involving society's current approach and ideologies surrounding adolescent and lone-mothers in general. Her narrative reflects wide spread issues that relate to gendered ideologies that, for a long time, added to Tammy's sense of self-defeat. Consideration of her story reflects the importance of critically analyzing and working to reframe messages that individuals are given in relation to the status quo. Tammy's story, along with Krumer-Nevo's (2003) study, instills the importance of individualizing support rather than enforcing policy and belief-ridden help to impoverished women.

Tammy also spoke of the importance of freedom and independence and we see how this was effected on many levels, again, often rooted in societal ideology and policy. Tammy's freedom was abolished, having lived within the physical imprisonment of an abusive relationship. One may choose to place blame on Tammy. Yet, she expressed her sense of commitment in providing her children with the right kind of home: a two-parent home. Further, her experience of living in poverty, prior to her marriage, left her imprisoned in the very real fear and implications of working to support her son financially.

As a lone-parent, Tammy was "doomed if she did, doomed if she didn't," as she struggled between working and sacrificing time with her children or staying at home but living on welfare, isolated and impoverished. Realistically, Tammy's options were limited through no fault of her own as she worked to survive within a society that segregates based on ideologies inherent in capitalism, hierarchical structures, and the status quo.

On a more positive light, Tammy currently experiences greater freedom within her university experience. It offers her the physical freedom to leave her home, the freedom inherent in developing her mind and intellect, and the flexibility to spend more time with her children. Despite this, a certain lack of freedom remains a theme within Tammy's life. She has limited finances to pursue many of her personal interests and is repeatedly faced with a lack of flexible, affordable, and quality childcare that would be necessary for her to develop her interests outside of her home.



Finally, although Tammy stated she is provided with more money through student loans than she has had in years, she will have a large student loan debt to pay off once she graduates. It will be interesting to speak to Tammy in several years to discover the implications her student debt will play in her future.

#### Focusing Comment

The internal and external dynamics as well as the process of personal development apparent as Tammy confronted the challenges in her life are indicative of her resilient nature. Indeed, Tammy has worked to overcome many of the risks that society associates with lone and teenage motherhood. Although the purpose of presenting Tammy's story is to celebrate Tammy and her life, her story also brings to light the importance of questioning how the status quo shapes assumptions and personal outcomes for at-risk individuals. Tammy's story acknowledges that even the most valiant efforts towards personal security are met by societal and systemic barriers over which women, such as Tammy, have little control. Tammy's perseverance in the face of adversity has attributed to many of her personal victories. Still, her story points to many societal ideologies and institutional policies and structures that create barriers to her vision of success and personal fulfillment.

#### Personal Reflections on My Study

One thing I recognized early on, when I chose my methodology, was that my story would never be complete. Initially, I celebrated the never-ending nature of this work. Since that earlier time, I have swung in and out of this comfort zone. Sometimes I am left with an uneasy feeling as the gaps in this work jump out at me now and call out for further exploration. Aside from this, the learning and insights that I have gleaned throughout this process leave me with a sense of restlessness because I have not explored them in this thesis. Indeed, I find it difficult to let this work go. Yet, my thesis continues to motivate me to explore questions about adolescent pregnancy.

I have decided to end this thesis by beginning again. If this sounds confusing, then you are entering into the personal space in which I now find myself floating.

I am flustered by the contradictions I presented throughout this research. In large part, they evolve around my growing realization of the impact of time and context on this and any work. How do I make peace with the mounds of risk-based research on adolescent pregnancy, my desire to explore this topic, and the realization that it is a topic that has evolved out of the specific political and social climate I am living in? I ask myself should teen pregnancy be focused upon as an issue at all? Perhaps, exploring context, in and of itself, is where I will find myself in the future...

The story I have created is one of triumph and resilience, overcoming great odds, yet a story of victimization and powerlessness against seemingly untouchable external forces. How will I come to understand this dichotomy? It seems to do so, again, depends upon examining this dichotomy within the context that births them.

Although my effort was to immerse myself in the data, working my way in and out, back and

forth, in the end I chose to present this story in a linear fashion. Through the guidance of my supervisory committee, I recognized the lack of congruence between the work I proposed and the work that emerged. In retrospect, I am beginning to understand what this means. However, such thinking was and is so ingrained within me, that truly allowing myself to feel comfortable scribbling outside the lines will be a difficult and tedious task in the future. Acknowledging the future, in itself, pays credence to this struggle. Goodbye for now and hello again...



**UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN  
BEHAVIOURAL RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD**

**NAME:** Denise J Larsen, Educational Psychology and Special Education BSC: 02-609  
Kathleen A. Thorpe

**DATE:** 27-Sep-2002

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Science Research Ethics Board has reviewed the Application for Ethics Approval for your study "Women Who Became Mothers During Their School-Age Years: Their Experience of Pursuing Full-time University Studies" (02-609).

1. Your study has been APPROVED.
2. Any significant changes to your proposed study should be reported to the Chair for Committee consideration in advance of its implementation.
3. The term of this approval is for 5 years.
4. This approval is valid for five years on the condition that a status report form is submitted annually to the Chair of the Committee. This certificate will automatically be invalidated if a status report form is not received within one month of the anniversary date.

I wish you a successful and informative study.

  
**Dr. Valerie Thompson, Chair**  
**Behavioural Research Ethics Board**

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## Appendix B

### INDEPTH INTERVIEW - GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. If you were asked to write a story describing what experiences led you to pursue a university education, where would you begin your story?
2. What were your hopes, plans or dreams in attending university?
3. Can you describe a typical day in your life as a university student?
4. What is the most challenging aspect of your life as a student?
5. How do you meet these challenges?
6. Are there supports that could be put in place, at an individual or university level, that would make meeting challenges easier for you?
7. What are the high points in your experience?
8. Have there been times that things happened unexpectedly in your story? Tell me about them. How has your life been informed by these experiences?
9. What are the most important lessons you are learning through your experience?
10. As you look over the last years, the birth of your child(ren), your decision to go to university and your experiences at university, are there metaphors that come to mind about the experience of being a young single mother at university? How do(es) that metaphor fit?
11. If you were to meet a young mom thinking about going to university, what would you want her to know?
12. What has it been like to participate in this interview?

## Appendix C

### CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a study entitled Women Who Became Mothers During Their School-Age Years: Their Experience of Pursuing Full-time University Studies. Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask questions you might have.

**Researcher:** Kathy Thorpe  
Dept. of Educational Psychology (student)  
Telephone: (306) 948-5349

**Supervisor:** Denise Larsen, Ph.D.  
Dept. of Educational Psychology (Assistant Professor)  
Telephone: (306) 966-5259

**Purpose and Procedure:** The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of women who became mothers before completing high school and who are currently enrolled as full-time students at the University of Saskatchewan. Should you consent to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an open-ended interview that is estimated to take approximately two hours. You may also be contacted for follow-up interviews if the researcher requires clarification or elaboration on information provided in the initial interview. If you choose, you will also be invited to provide the researcher with personal documents, such as poetry, journal entries, artwork or other personal artifacts that you feel express your experience. These personal documents will serve two purposes. The first is to aid the researcher in developing her personal understanding of you and your experiences. Second, copies of your personal document, in whole or part, may be presented within the final thesis document. This will only be done with your written consent. If you agree to having your personal document related in the final thesis document, you will be asked to sign the bottom portion of a Transcript Release Form to signify your consent. If you do offer personal documents for use, this portion of the Transcript Release Form will be offered and explained to you, in more detail, at a later date. Personal documents and/or information you provide that is related to other individuals will not be used in the final thesis product unless the researcher is able to contact the third party individual and gains written consent, from the third party, to use this information. Once the researcher has completed writing your transcripts, you will be asked to review this work to ensure the transcripts accurately reflect what you said or intended to say. Once you have gone through the transcripts and any necessary changes are made, you will be asked to sign a Transcript Release Form acknowledging that the existing transcript is an accurate reflection of your experience.

**Potential Risks and Discomforts:** It is not expected you will experience any type of risk or discomfort throughout the course of this research. However, should you experience any emotional discomfort, or discomfort of any kind related to your participation in this study, you are encouraged to tell the researcher. In this case, prearrangements have been made to provide you with counseling services through Family Service Saskatoon. This service will be provided to you free of charge. As a matter of course, contact information for counseling will be provided to you, by the researcher, at your first interview.

**Potential Benefits:** An important aspect of this study is to provide you with an opportunity to share your personal experiences related to this topic. In doing so, it is the hope of the researcher that you will emerge from this work with an increased awareness of your achievements and feel empowered by the wisdom and experiences you share. It is also possible, although not guaranteed, that your shared experiences will provide readers with insight into issues faced by young mothers attending university. It is also possible, although not guaranteed, that other young mothers will be inspired and informed by the experiences that you share.

**Confidentiality of Data:** All information will be kept confidential. However, if you disclose information pertaining to child abuse or you inform the researcher of an intent to do violence towards another human being, the researcher is obligated to inform the relevant authorities (ie: Social Services, law enforcement agency). To protect your confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms will be used and all identifying information (places or specific situations) changed to protect your identity. You do, however, have the

option of maintaining your true identity within the final thesis document. In this case you will be asked to sign the bottom portion of this Consent Form that signifies your choice to reveal your true identity. If at any time, during the course of this study, you decide to maintain your anonymity, all identifying information will be deleted from your transcripts. You will also have the option of making this decision later in the research process. Unless documented to the contrary, you will maintain your anonymity in this study and all identifying information will be deleted from your transcripts. For the purpose of transcribing, I will ask you at the beginning of our interview session, for permission to audio tape. All audio tapes and documents related to this research will be stored in a locked cabinet to ensure no one other than the researcher and her supervisor have access to them.

The findings that result from this study will be compiled in the form of a Master's Thesis that will be made public through the University of Saskatchewan Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education thesis library. The results of this study may be disseminated more widely than the thesis. For example, results may be presented at conferences or published in scholarly journals. The final thesis may include direct quotations gathered through your interview with the researcher. After your interview and prior to the data being included in the final thesis, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview and to add, alter, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit. If you are satisfied with what appears in the transcripts and consent to having these documents published in the final thesis product, you will be asked to signify your consent by signing a Transcript Release Form. There is also a separate portion on the bottom of the Transcript Release Form that relates to any personal documents (poetry, journal entries, artwork, etc.) you may provide. If you give permission for the researcher to include all or portions of these personal documents in the final thesis product, you will be asked to sign the bottom portion of the Transcript release form to signify your consent. Personal documents that include information that may identify you or others will not be published in the final work unless written permission is attained from all parties concerned. Any personal documents used in the final thesis will be replicas of your original document. All original documents will be returned to you. It is possible that you may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what you have said or details of your story. If you choose to remain anonymous, the final transcripts will be edited by the researcher and her research supervisor for the purpose of checking that all identifying information has been changed.

**Right to Withdraw:** You are free to withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time, without penalty of any sort (and without loss of relevant entitlements, without affecting academic or employment status, without losing access to relevant services, etc). If you withdraw from the study at any time, any data that you have contributed will be destroyed. You will be reminded verbally, by the researcher of your right to withdraw before your in depth interview. You have the right to refuse to answer individual questions during the in depth interview. You will also be invited to read your final transcript once it is complete. If you are satisfied that the final transcript is an accurate description of your experience, you will be asked to sign a Transcript Release Form. At this time, you will again be reminded verbally, and in writing of your right to withdraw from the study. If you have submitted personal documents, such as journal entries, poetry, artwork or other documents that you feel help to portray your experience, you will be asked to sign the bottom portion of the Transcript Release Form to acknowledge your consent to use these documents in a Master's thesis. You will be reminded, at this time, of your right to withdraw the use of any or all documents submitted to the researcher.

**Offer to Answer Questions:** If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to ask at any point; you are also free to contact the researcher or her supervisor at the numbers provided above if you have any questions at a later time. This study has been approved on ethical ground by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Sciences Research Ethics Board on (insert date). Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Office of Research Services (966-4053). Research findings will be available to you during and after the period of this study through the Department of Educational Psychology upon completion of this thesis. Once the final thesis is printed the researcher will offer you a personal copy of the thesis.

**Consent to Participate:** I have read and understood the description provided above. I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I consent to participate in the study described above, understanding that I may withdraw this consent at any time. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Researcher)

Appendix D

**TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the completed transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Kathleen A. Thorpe. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Kathleen A. Thorpe to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

_____ Participant	_____ Date
_____ Researcher	_____ Date

**Please refer to this portion of the form if you have submitted personal documents to be used in this study**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, acknowledge that I have volunteered personal documents to the researcher for the purpose of this study and consent to the use of the following personal documents to be used within the manner described in the Consent Form. I also acknowledge that I have been reminded, by the researcher, of my right to withdraw any personal documents I have submitted, for use in this study.

If you consent to the use of personal documents, please list personal documents below:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

_____ Participant	_____ Date
_____ Researcher	_____ Date

### The Calming Pattern

- Defined by suffering
- Need for release from suffering
- When met: increased sense of personal peace and more positive interaction with children

Poverty, childcare and work difficulties, low self-esteem, abusive relationship, loneliness, guilt

Relocates back near her parent's home, new relationship

Decision to collect welfare and focus on parenting following second pregnancy; decision to remain single

### The Empowerment Pattern

- Defined by desire to enrich lives and develop strengths
- Need for education, practical supports and encouragement
- When met: Acceptance, learning and empowerment

Changing values and recognition of the importance of her own happiness; taking action to create change

Educating self in Asperger's Syndrome, advocating for son, starts home business, counselling, parent-aid

Increase in "I can" language, self-discovery and challenge, applies for university

### The Re-biography Pattern

- Defined by focus on personal revolution, change, self-discovery
- Need for existential conversation to promote self-reflection
- When met: change in behavior and understanding of the world and challenges, increased self-awareness,

"finding self" at university, new excitement and energy, taking responsibility for life direction

Seeking out friends with common interests, choosing classes that reflect her mindset, taking part in study

Self-directive, "life is like a school" philosophy, challenges a means of learning, hope for future

